Juno Steel and the Last Locked Door

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Juno Steel and the Last Locked Door

by FaintlyMacabre

Summary

After their successful theft of the Map, the crew of the Carte Blanche is on to the next item on their legendary list: the Key. This time, they're not lifting it from a silly socialite at an extravagant party; the Key is in the possession of a mysterious person known only as the Warden, who runs a prison that's taken over an entire moon. Once again, it will be Juno Steel and Peter Ransom on the ground. Unlike last time, they'll be working together at a distance, as Peter poses as an inmate and Juno as a guard. Holy fuck, it's: Juno Steel and the Last Locked Door.

Updates Tuesdays and Fridays.

Notes

Written for the 2019/20 Penumbra Minibang!

Big thanks to reconditarmonia for listening when I needed to yell about my ideas, and to @transnureyev on Tumblr for the *freaking magnificent artwork* he created for this fic!! And thank you to the Minibang Discord, even if I lurked more than anything. Y'all kept me on track and I wouldn't have written this without you.

This fic is complete and will update on Tuesdays and Fridays. Content warnings will be included at the beginning of chapters that require them. This chapter contains references to police brutality.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

[image]

It was a beautiful day on the Carte Blanche. According to Galactic Standard Time, anyway. You wouldn't know whether it was day or night just by looking out the window, into the darkness of space studded with distant stars, but it really was beautiful.

It was pretty beautiful if you didn't look out the window, too, or at least, it was from where I was sitting. I'd just woken up to the sight of Nureyev's sleeping face on the pillow next to mine, his parted lips revealing just a hint of the sharp teeth behind them, eyelids moving slightly as he dreamed. I wondered what he was dreaming about. Don't think I've ever wondered that about someone before. Dreams don't mean anything, just synapses firing in ways that would be pointless in waking hours, but I found myself wanting to know every way this man's mind worked.

We didn't try this again right after our first real conversation on the ship. It took a lot more conversations after that, and I had to say, it had been completely worth it.

His eyes stayed closed, but his breathing changed. "Nureyev," I whispered, "I know you're awake." I actually wasn't a hundred percent sure, but I was getting better at reading him, and I figured if I said it quietly enough I wouldn't wake him if I was wrong. But he smiled and blinked and looked up at me, and my heart skipped.

"Can't get anything past you, detective," he whispered back, and I couldn't control the smile that stretched across my face. God, I really was gone, wasn't I. But that realization didn't scare me—which maybe should have been scary in itself, but maybe I was done being scared of my own feelings, at least when it came to him. He reached for me and I could tell the morning was about to get even better when a flurry of knocks came down on my door.

“Mr. Steeeeel,” Rita called through the door. “Captain A’s meeting’s in five minutes, you don’t want to be late!” I groaned and Nureyev laughed at me. Ass.

“I live one minute from the meeting, Rita, I’m not gonna be late!”

“Okay, just wanted to make sure, love you, *bye!*” Her voice trailed off as she left, presumably for the kitchen, our usual meeting spot.

“I guess we should get up.” I shook my head and looked back at Nureyev, and the look he was giving me… “I mean it,” I said, trying to mean it.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he said. “I suppose I should take a moment to freshen up.” He climbed nimbly over me and threw on his robe—no, actually, that was *my* robe. He paused at the door and looked over his shoulder. “See you at breakfast.” And then he was gone, leaving me to will myself out of bed and into some relatively clean clothes, instead of spending the next four minutes thinking about the way my robe looked on him.

I couldn’t pretend this latest attempt with Juno was easy for me.

No, that’s not true. I certainly could pretend, but that does not make it so.

Not that it was in any way a chore, or an ordeal. It was a delight, and in some ways it was easy for me the way nothing else was. But that's just it—it was like nothing else. I haven't been in a relationship in a very long time; the last one was lovely, and ended sadly, and my line of work, my life, does not lend itself to being shared with others. On jobs, I become other people, and those people know how to act around whomever they meet. The people I've become have been sweet, flattering, teasing, awed, authoritative, grateful, whatever produced the desired effect. Whatever made the job easier. What did I do when it wasn't a job? When the effect I desired was unmanufactured intimacy and mutual devotion?

Apparently, what I did was wake up next to Juno Steel, flirt without thinking too hard about it, and steal his robe to go back to my room. Of course the clothes I'd worn yesterday were there, but this was faster. Not good to keep the captain waiting, after all. The fact that it smelled like Juno was just an unlooked-for benefit.

Other things I did: wash up a bit and dress quickly, swipe on a deep red lipstick Juno liked, and waste crucial seconds remembering what his lips had done to me the previous night. Snap myself out of it and nearly walk into Jet on my way out the door. Respond with a calm and gracious "Thank you," when he boomed out "After you" instead of visibly celebrating an interaction with the pilot in which he did not solely convey annoyance or distrust. Perhaps the corner I'd turned with Juno was resulting in an increased ease with the rest of the crew, and that despite my regrettable choice of pseudonym, I had finally, for once, found a place where I could breathe.

"Right on time, Ransom, Jet," Buddy said when we walked in. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, Captain," I said, sitting down at one of the two empty seats at the table, just moments before Juno walked in, looking nearly as disheveled as he had when I'd last seen him. God, he was beautiful.

“Sorry,” he mumbled before sitting down next to me.

“’Bout time everybody showed up,” Vespa growled, glaring at Juno. “Food’s getting cold.” I hadn’t expected Vespa to be such a good cook—she didn’t let anyone in the kitchen while she was working except for Buddy, but she really was excellent.

“Thank you, my love,” Buddy said, and it was remarkable to watch Vespa’s face soften even that little bit. It didn’t sting to see anymore, now that I’d dropped my veneer of disdain and conceded to my feelings for Juno. It was remarkable that this could be my life, relative safety and warmth, without giving up my career. It was both terrifying and extremely comforting.

“Now, I know it’s been a while since we last spoke of our overarching goal,” Buddy was saying. “Our first installment was both more exciting than anticipated and wildly successful.” Juno glanced over at me and grinned, and I couldn’t help but smile back. “I’d like to thank you all for your patience and diligence as I’ve planned our next big move. Our interim survival jobs, while less thrilling, did exactly what they were needed for, and I don’t think it’s unwarranted to tell you that I’m proud of how our little family is fitting together.

“Which makes this the perfect and, frankly, only time to prepare for our theft of the Hermesian Key.”

I sat up straighter. Most of the time I’d tried not to think about the Curemother Prime, as I couldn’t do anything to acquire it faster and I had more immediate concerns, but I must have lost either my talent or my taste for compartmentalization, because the thoughts kept slipping through.

“It’s being held on the prison moon Janus, notable for its impenetrability,” Buddy said. “It really gives new meaning to the phrase ‘maximum security,’ as even finding out that the key was there took all of our considerable resources.” She looked over at Rita, who beamed back. The captain was like that; she could make you feel the warmth of her belief in you with just a look. Rita’s glee was contagious, and I found myself smiling, too. This would be a challenge, and could be a chance for me to prove myself not just to Buddy, but the rest of the crew, as well. Our theft of the Gilded Globe was successful, yes, but clumsy. This time I wouldn’t let doubt or jealousy get in the way, and I—*we*—would succeed.

“No one can land on Janus in secret,” Buddy said. “Its entire surface is under constant surveillance. Therefore, we will not be going in secret; we’re going in through the front gates while the guards wave us through.”

“What, all of us?” There was no way, right? Sure, I was new to this but six was way too many, right?

“No, Juno.” Something about the way Buddy said my name was unsettling, somehow, grave in a way she wasn’t usually. “You will be posing as a guard facilitating the transfer of a prisoner.”

“So who’s the prisoner?” I said. Vespa glared at me, but she wasn’t about to interrupt Buddy the way I was, not unless she felt really pushed. I already didn’t love this, but it was about to get so much worse.

“That would be Ransom.”

I turned to look at him. Nureyev was focused on Buddy, seemingly calm except for a slight tremor in his hand when he sipped his tea. That tremor would have been a full-body shudder on anyone else, and suddenly I felt like shuddering, too.

“Why Ransom?” I asked. “Why can’t it be literally anyone else?” It wasn’t fair, I knew, but I just — I just had to protect him from this, all right?

“Juno.” I knew he was trying to stop me but it wasn’t going to work.

“No, I — I want to know.”

“Your conditions for employment did not include ‘questioning my ability to make decisions,’ Juno,” Buddy said, “but just this once, I’ll make you privy to my process. You have the relevant experience and the skillset and we have very little time to prepare, so as much as you may want to protest, you are the ideal choice for our prison guard.” She held up her hand when I opened my mouth again. “Most of us could pass as prisoners, true, but with my allergies and Vespa’s blood filtration bracelet, it would be extremely risky for either of us to be locked up that long, both for our health and for the sake of our overarching mission.” Vespa glared at me as if I’d specifically requested either of them. “And, no offense, darling, but no prison worth the titanium it’s built from would ever send an escort of your stature along with someone like Jet. Of course, we need Rita here for the myriad technical aspects of the job, and we need a thief on the ground. There is no one else for this.

“I urge you to remember, Juno,” Buddy cut me off again, “that with the exception of Rita and yourself, we are all wanted criminals. Some of us have been incarcerated before. None of us consider it a

preferable outcome. I do not make this decision lightly. This gives us the best chance of succeeding at our mission, and of all of us surviving the job."

And that all made a lot of sense, much as I hated to admit it. So I didn't admit it. I probably would have kept arguing with nothing more in my holster than, "No, I hate this," if Nureyev hadn't laid a hand on my arm.

"Of course, Captain Aurinko," he said, with a quick glance my way. "I'm eager to hear the rest of the plan."

I'll admit, it was almost nice hearing Juno stand up for me like that. "Almost" because he didn't have a leg to stand on. Of course there were well-founded reasons for Buddy's casting. She sometimes seemed to make decisions lightly, but every single time I reflected after she gave an order, I realized that it was as perfectly weighted as the blades I carry on my person at all times.

"Glad to hear it, Pete," she said as though nothing unusual had happened at all. I realized I still had my hand on Juno's arm, and then I realized I was allowed this, drawing comfort from another person, comforting him in turn. I left it there and tried to focus on Buddy's words.

"We'll be doing this in three days. Juno, you'll be a guard transferring from Oneiros Penitentiary on Rosalind and escorting an inmate, Ransom, at the same time. Rita, you'll be in the system, ensuring that Juno and Ransom can stay close together. Day one, you'll get the lay

of the land. Settle in and take the opportunity to gather information — Ransom, from the inmates, and Juno, from the guards. Be wary of the Warden. They don't have a legal name on file, not that we could find, and they haven't been off the surface of Janus in four years, and for nearly a decade before that. This is not just their job, it is their life, and it is of the utmost importance that we not underestimate them."

I certainly didn't plan to; *I* could still be found in a file somewhere, and possibly more than one. My reckless choice of pseudonym, I neglected to realize months ago, was a weight around my ankle. Easy enough for a skilled hacker to link the two names, if it occurred to them. I forced myself not to look at Rita again.

"Day two, evening of, you will conduct the actual theft. Memorize the map on your comms: it includes routes to the sector where we've located the Key and the room in which it's most likely being kept. Day three, we will extract you. We will not garner a warm welcome a second time, so it is imperative that everyone is precisely where they need to be, precisely when they need to be there. Besides the maps, I am sending the schedule and all other details to your comms right… now." Five comms around the table beeped. "So unless there are any other questions, I encourage you to study and rest up for the next couple of days. You'll need it."

"There's oddly little information out there on Janus," Nureyev said, frowning at his comms. "Annoying, really." As if this were just any other job, any other target to research. We were in my room the night before the dropoff, nominally going over our maps and schedule but actually just staring into space, for the most part. Well, I was.

I couldn't take it anymore. "Hey, you don't have to do this."

Nureyev took off his glasses and pretended to clean them with a sad smile. “We’ve been here before, haven’t we?”

My breath caught.

“And my answer is the same now as then,” Nureyev continued. “I do have to do this, Juno. We need the Key, and this is the only way we have a shot at getting it. I don’t like it, but what we’re working toward is important, and I’m not going to jeopardize that because of a distaste for the role I have to play.”

“It’s more than distaste and you know it,” I said, resisting the voice in my head that said he was right. “If one thing goes wrong —”

“Buddy will come for us.”

“The ship’ll be shot out of the sky!”

“Juno, please.” Nureyev’s voice was so soft, it cut straight through my tirade. “Of course I don’t like it. I don’t think anyone does, but it’ll just be a few days, and then we’ll have the Key and we’ll be that much closer to our goal.”

“But —”

“I wouldn’t have agreed if I didn’t believe we could pull this off,” Nureyev said. “All of us as a crew, yes, but specifically, Juno, you and I can do this.” His hands twitched up as though he was going to reach for mine and thought better of it. I knew that hesitation. I took his

hands and held them; if I couldn't stop this horror show, I could at least lend him a little warmth.

"I trust you," I said, wincing as my voice broke, "but I can't shake the thought of— what the hell am I going to do if I screw up and get you" — I couldn't get the actual word out — "hurt?"

"You won't," Nureyev said.

"Nureyev—"

"You won't." Nureyev freed his hands to frame the sides of my face, looking me in the eye for a dizzying moment before he kissed me, soft and deep. I kissed him back, not sure when my hands had come to rest on Nureyev's thighs, letting his heat, his solidity, the smell of that cologne envelop me, ground me…

I pulled back just far enough to speak. "Nureyev."

"Hmm?" Nureyev hadn't wasted any time in moving his lips to my jaw, to my neck… *Focus* , Steel.

"No, stop, I'm trying to be serious." At that, Nureyev backed away, eyes full of concern. "You can't walk onto a max security prison moon as an inmate smelling like that."

"Like what?"

Like a goddamn meal , my brain supplied unhelpfully. "Rich. Marquess

has been in jail for seven years, he didn't stop for a vacation in the middle."

"I see what you mean." Nureyev looked thoughtful for a second, then grinned. I don't know if the thrill that went through me was an animal brain reaction to those teeth, or, you know, a decidedly human brain reaction to those teeth. "You're absolutely right. But I'm afraid I don't own any nondescript-smelling soap."

"You can borrow mine," I said. "It's the cheapest, blandest soap across nine planets and twenty-seven moons. It's perfect."

"Very obliging of you, detective," Nureyev said, and wow, yeah, it was definitely the latter option. "You truly are too good to me. But I wonder —" He unfolded his absurdly long legs to stand beside the bed and held out a hand to me. "Might I impose on you for just a little longer? I could really use your… attention to detail."

Okay, so, half of my brain was rolling its eyes (eye?) at that ridiculous line. The other half, the half that won, already had me off the bed, holding his hand, and on the way to the shower.

I had chosen my own name, as always. It amused me to think that even if the guards were rough with me, they'd still be referring to me as royalty. Unless, of course, they only called the prisoners by number. My good humor faltered a bit at that, but I shook away the thought. I liked to think that I'd made strides toward being more open about my feelings (at least where Juno was concerned), but one does need a break from vulnerability. Besides, I was an excellent actor, this would

just be a new challenge for me. And soon it would be over.

I tried to keep my post-shower calm about me, even as I tried not to get distracted by my memories of Juno, smile shining like the sun, those little sounds he made that were barely audible over the rush of the water, his hands…

File that under: For Future Consideration, subcategories: Near Future, and Often. Compartmentalization, while potentially damaging, does have its time and place. Now, it was time to work.

Salvador Marquess wasn't a particularly clever man, which I've played before, successfully, although while certain former characters could be called "easily distracted" or, less charitably, "airheaded," Marquess didn't think of himself as sharp. He valued action over thought, straightforward violence over defusing the situation. Not devious, but certainly dangerous. He'd killed at least two previous business partners over an unbalanced division of their ill-gotten gains. More recently — the reason for his transfer, in fact — he'd killed his cellmate, whom he'd suspected of stealing his commissary snacks. Well. Normally I'd say I've done worse for worse reasons, but nothing came to mind.

The aspect of this identity that gave me pause was just how little I was required to talk — or rather, how important it was that I *not* talk, for the most part. Everyone I have ever been has had his own voice. Many of the heists I've completed over my career depended on my ability to talk myself into and out of tight corners. Even when my words seemed blundering or artless, they were just a tool turned in a very specific way, and I could wield them like a lockpick.

"They're already expecting you to be a criminal," I told myself. "They'll already be suspicious. The more they underestimate you, the better." If they didn't think me capable of subtlety or cunning, they wouldn't watch me more closely than anyone else.

The thought I'd kept away until now surfaced: Juno would be better at this than I. I hated myself for it immediately. It wasn't as though I thought him unintelligent — as had been clear from the first day we met, Juno's mind is *incredible*. But who would people assume was the hit-first-ask-questions-later, subtle-as-an-Aknan-megabull-in-a-synth-crystal-shop criminal — the scowling, muscle-bound lady covered in scars, or the man next to him who looked as though he could blow away in a sandstorm?

It didn't matter. Decisions had been made, and our plan waited only for the morning. Maybe if we'd had more time, the casting could have been more malleable; Juno wouldn't feel as though he were stepping back into some of the worst parts of his past, and I wouldn't feel as though I were staring down the barrel of a gun that had been waiting for me for twenty-five odd years.

The uniform was unsettling in a way I hadn't expected. It wasn't *comfortable* , that was completely the wrong word, but it was familiar. Not exactly like HCPD standard issue, but close enough that when the final button was buttoned I was twenty-three years old again, pretending I was sure of my purpose and place in the world. If Ma could see me now — not all the progress I've made in the past year, nothing else past age nineteen — this would be exactly what she was expecting.

I shook my head and took a deep breath, another, another. *This isn't real* , I reminded myself. *It's a costume, you're going there to keep Nureyev safe, it won't be long before you can take this off for good.* I didn't entirely believe it, but it helped to shape the words in my mind.

I reread the info Buddy had sent me, anxious about losing even a single detail. They weren't going to let me stay with Nureyev once he'd been processed, and I couldn't exactly wear an earpiece. No expectation of privacy on a prison moon, even if you weren't an inmate.

Officer Cassidy Roux was forty, had been working in "corrections" for fifteen years, starting on Mercury and following that up with a longer stint on Rosalind, where an altercation with an inmate had prompted Roux's transfer. I gritted my teeth and shook my head. I'd been around enough cops who'd stopped seeing people as people to know what that looked like, and to know that I'd sooner abandon my career than go down that road. Not that the choice had been in my hands, ultimately.

I had to focus. This wasn't about me. Whoever this fictional guard was, the most I had in common with him was a face and a knowledge of Solar law enforcement practices.

So how did Nureyev get into character? Surely he didn't love every persona he put on for a job. I got up and faced my reflection on the back of the door. Instead of looking myself in the eye, I focused on the collar of the shirt. Buddy was good at details: the seam where the collar met the shoulders had a permanent crease, as though it had been worn on a near daily basis. It was even slightly discolored, dark green against black, like the stain of someone's sweat that had never fully washed out.

That was grosser than I meant it to be. Whatever. The point was, I was only ever going to be around people in this uniform, and these clothes already looked like they had a story in them. A lot of stories, probably, I thought, just as I noticed a nearly invisible drop of what looked like blood on the right sleeve cuff, and none of them pleasant.

Maybe the visuals were distracting me. I closed my eye and breathed, trying to shake the tension out of my shoulders. Neutral. I pictured Hijikata, Kapoor, Beluga, real bastards, all of them. They'd spread themselves out almost carelessly, as though they were twice as big as they really were and they'd officially requisitioned your personal space. There was a hardness to them, a meanness in their eyes, a tension in their hands and jaws, that showed just how close they were to doing something drastic. When they walked, their footsteps were heavy. They wanted you to know they were coming. They wanted you to worry about what would happen when they finally got to you.

I opened my eyes to face this new mask in the mirror and I felt sick. There he was. I'd run from this person for two decades, done whatever I could to keep from becoming him, from seeing these things in myself, and he still caught up to me.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Juno and Peter land on Janus.

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, human rights violations

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Warden wasn't what I was expecting. A square-shaped person, taller than Juno but not nearly as tall as me, hands in their pockets and an affable smile on their face.

"Right on time," they said, and their voice sounded almost like—

No. I had to shut my eyes against memory. No need to call to mind a dead man, years ago and millions of miles away. I wasn't sure what had prompted the thought, exactly; lots of people sounded like—

Like that.

"Officer Cassidy Roux, transporting inmate 008547: Marquess, Salvador." Juno's tone was steady but clipped, the voice of someone who'd been doing this for a long time. I tried to listen not to his words, but to the familiar tenor he'd spoken them in, one that I'd heard sound furious, smug, despondent, breathless…

I snapped himself out of it before I could give away the game with my expression or body language. Mortifying as it was, I'd recently learned that I wasn't as hard to read as I'd thought, and it was important that I exercise the utmost vigilance while in disguise.

“A pleasure to meet you, Officer Roux.” They didn’t give a name. “I trust your trip was—well, who really enjoys interplanetary travel anyway?” *Some of us*, I thought, but of course I couldn’t say so, and the Warden was still talking. “But here you are, safe and sound. Glad to have you on board.”

I saw Juno nod, short and sharp, out of the corner of my eye.

“Let’s go, Marquess,” Juno said, clamping a hand down on my shoulder. It looked rough, I was sure, but for half a second Juno ran his thumb over my shoulder blade, a tiny reassurance.

“Ah, Officer Roux.” At the Warden’s voice, Juno turned to face them, hand still on my shoulder. I cursed inwardly. Of course—it wasn’t as though a guard who should be completely unfamiliar with the prison layout could escort anyone. “We need to finish your transfer paperwork before you can continue working.” They pressed a button on the wall and shrugged, a lazy What Can You Do? “I’ll have one of your new colleagues take over for you while we get everything squared away, and then I’ll show you to the barracks.”

“ *You* will?” Juno blurted out. We’d expected an underling to escort him, maybe someone Juno could get some information from, a potential ally for Officer Cassidy Roux.

“Oh, yes,” the Warden said, smiling. “I like to take a hands-on approach to my work; my employees should feel able to consult me when necessary. I’m not aiming to be some shadowy figure at the top of a tower!” A guard entered the room and stood at attention. “Officer da Silva, please escort the prisoner to J-11-73.” The guard nodded and Juno released my shoulder without ceremony. Da Silva steered me by the shoulder, nothing like the deceptively gentle hold Juno had had on me. She was tall and broad with a firm grip; I was sure I’d have bruises from her fingers. But I didn’t flinch, and I didn’t look back.

“Follow me, please, Officer Roux.” The Warden left through another door. I followed. We ended up in a small, tidy office with terrible fluorescent lighting.

“This is your office?” I asked. Not exactly the most secure location—sure, this whole place was a prison, but this was barely a hundred feet from the front door. And not what I would have expected for the leader of this entire operation. And, most importantly, not where it had been on the map.

“Oh, no, just the personnel office.” The Warden opened the top drawer of a filing cabinet and pulled a folder out. “This is where we keep all the standard onboarding paperwork and employee files.”

“There are… a lot of filing cabinets here.” I looked around the room. Depending on how thorough the files were, this room could have housed the records of every guard—not to mention every ancillary employee — since the prison was founded. Unless… The records couldn’t be confined to this room, or rooms like it, Rita would have known something was up right away when she looked into this place. But how much were we missing?

“There are a lot of employees!” The Warden said brightly. “Janus is the oldest running prison moon in the solar system.”

“Too old for digital?” The remark was out before I knew it. *Shit.*

But the Warden was laughing. “Ah, Roux, I must admit I wasn’t prepared for wit! Most people veer toward gallows humor at best after

a few years in our line of work, in my experience. No, we just have relatively high turnover in our IT department—the environment being somewhat unforgiving, I suppose—so when it comes to records like this, we like to have hard copy backups."

"I was never much for computers myself," I said, trying not to sound as relieved as I felt. We weren't flying blind, Rita could still get in, and maybe I could still find out if there was any necessary information she hadn't been able to access.

"Lady after my own heart," the Warden said. They weren't looking at me, instead thumbing through sheets of paper in the file. "Oh, don't worry, we're not barbarians! I'm sure we'll have all the comforts you're used to, with regard to lighting, plumbing, entertainment, etc. We just tend to rely on hard copies, and reserve our off-world communications for emergencies, and we haven't had one of those in… Ha, I can't even remember!"

Okay. Emergencies probably meant that long-range comms were scarce, or just in the Warden's office, but it wasn't an insurmountable issue. We still had the three days; we just had to hope that we didn't need the crew to pick us up before the scheduled extraction. Famous last words.

"Well, here you are—take a seat, Roux. This'll be tedious, but we only have to do it once, and then we can both get back to work."

I sat across from them, feeling the pit in my stomach grow deeper.

The guard—da Silva—marched me through nondescript corridors. They were largely windowless, but I memorized the turns we took: right, right, left, when a voice called out behind us.

“Hey, da Silva, any way I could persuade you to make a detour?”

If the guard turned I couldn’t see it, but her grip didn’t loosen. If anything, she held on a little tighter, although that might have been just the discomfort interfering with my perception. She could wrap nearly her entire hand around my bicep; I wasn’t going anywhere she didn’t want me.

“Depends. What’s it to you?” Da Silva’s voice was surprisingly melodic, for her hard tone.

“Haven’t gotten my exercise for the day.” The speaker stepped into view. He was short, wiry, with a purple buzz cut, blue eyeliner, and a smile I didn’t like in the slightest. “And since you’re here…”

“Whatever. Make it quick, Prentice, I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

“You and everyone else.” Prentice approached and the grip on my arm disappeared. I shook my arm out minutely, a moment before Prentice’s fist connected with my jaw. I was almost more surprised than in pain, and I stumbled. His next punch landed on my lower back, a kidney, probably. I wanted to yell, to strike back, but my alias and present company prevented the former and the handcuffs prevented the latter. The guard, meanwhile, had taken advantage of my momentum and shoved me to the ground. I curled into a ball as he kicked, wondering how long it would be before I started bleeding internally, if I wasn’t already.

“Okay, that’s enough.” The kicks stopped and da Silva’s hand pulled

me back to my feet. I stood up as straight as I could and spat on the ground. No blood. Presumably I'd have been able to taste it, but the confirmation helped.

"That wasn't even a minute, da Silva."

"Like I said, schedule to keep." She marched me down the hallway, away from Prentice.

"You're no fun!" he called after us.

"I'm not paid to be fun." We walked at the same measured pace as before, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. In all likelihood, nothing out of the ordinary *had* happened. I resolved not to show any sign of pain or injury, occupying my mind by repeating the turns we'd already made. We must have only walked for a couple of minutes longer (right, slight left) when we went through a door into a cellblock.

The first image the place called to mind was inappropriately whimsical: it was like being in a cylinder bounded by boxes of animal crackers. The cells were stacked high, facing an observation tower in the center, the bars over them making the people inside look not so much imprisoned as caged. Narrow walkways ringed each level, and spindly staircases connected them all. There were no ground level cells; instead, the base of the cylinder housed identical entrances to seemingly identical hallways. I glanced around to set an image in my mind of my immediate surroundings before the guard pushed me up one staircase and halfway around the circumference of the cylinder.

She unlocked a cell door and shoved me in. I stumbled, but kept my balance enough to stay standing. The easiest aspect of this alias: Salvador Marquess had astonishing spatial awareness and control of his body. Or he had, before encountering a sadist in a windowless

corridor on a prison moon. I waited for some kind of snide comment from the guard behind me, reminded myself that Marquess was not especially clever and would not have a retort ready for whatever she said, but all I heard was the slamming of the cell door and, “Hands to the bars.”

The cuffs, of course. I closed the short distance, inadvertently thinking of the last time I’d been in handcuffs. The situations bore no resemblance to each other, of course. I even asked Juno back onboard the Carte Blanche if he wanted to do the honors, but he'd only looked a bit sick and said, “Once was enough for me, Nureyev.” Well, no need to try to flirt my way out of them now, even if I’d had the stomach for it. Da Silva’s face didn’t betray any expression at all, and I matched her blankness, staring her down as she removed the cuffs and walked away. With that done, I massaged my wrists and took in my surroundings.

It should have been louder, I realized. Having never been incarcerated myself, having never set foot in a prison anything like this one, it had taken me a while to notice how eerily quiet the place was.

“They fuck you up.” Just a whisper, but it was coming from inside the cell and I hadn’t noticed anyone else in there with me—I should have noticed, so much for exceptional spatial awareness, something had gone wrong—

“…Your mum and dad,” the voice continued. “They may not mean to, but they do.” And now I could see why I hadn’t noticed the man before; he was tucked into the bottom bunk, gray sheets covering a gray jumpsuit, grayed hair, graying skin. The only moving parts of him were his chest, rising and falling ever so slightly, and, presumably, his mouth, hidden from this angle. I still should have noticed.

The man was still talking — reciting, it sounded like, from the cadence. “They fill you with the faults they had—”

“He says it all the time,” came a voice from the other side of one of the walls. “Doesn’t say anything else. I’d say sorry, but I’ve been living with it for… what year is it?”

The question was casual, no hint of trepidation, and that chilled my blood like nothing else. “2831.”

“Huh.”

“What’s it called?” I asked. “The… poem?”

“Dunno,” the voice said. “Never heard it before I got here, and heard him. I thought it was funny at first, but…”

There was an indistinct mumble, from the same cell, it sounded like.

“*You* shut up,” the first voice said. “You’ve slept through worse. Name’s Rowan.” I could tell this last part was directed at me.

“First or last?”

“Even one name’s kind of a luxury in here, pal.”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see me. “Marquess.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah. You too.”

“At least your housing’s in walking distance,” the Warden said. “Can’t say that about every building on this rock!” I nodded, my boots crunching on the fine gravel of the moon’s surface. Another crunching came from behind us and a small, round vehicle driven by a guard shot by. “I trust you have your license? Only joking, I know you have your license.” The Warden laughed lightly. I wondered how they could possibly be so content, happy, even, in a place with apparently no redeeming features. I remembered wondering something similar about Nureyev once upon a time, seeing those bright eyes in the dark of that tomb. This was like the mirror opposite of that situation. Anyone who could be genuinely happy in a place like this… well, maybe it was just lucky for the rest of the universe that they weren’t anywhere else.

“Now that we’ve finished your paperwork,” the Warden said, “I’d like to address the events that led to your transfer.”

I’d thought up a few lines I could use in advance, things that would let anyone who got too curious know what scum Cassidy Roux really was, and I hated all of them. I’d based them on things I’d heard other cops at the HCPD say, which made them easier to invent and worse to call to mind. “Look—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Roux. I’ve been in this business a long time, I understand better than most that there are mitigating circumstances, subtleties to every situation, and sometimes the best thing to do is get a little rough.” They looked at me without turning their head. “And between you and me, that wasn’t the first time you’d

had to get rough, was it?"

I sucked in a breath without meaning to. Rita had been thorough with our aliases, included reports that had been "wiped" of Roux's various assaults on inmates, emails back and forth between his superiors discussing just how many chances to give him. Good thing she had; seemed like the Warden wasn't as much of a technophobe as he'd implied. I nodded.

"You look like I'm about to scold you, Roux! I'm not. Whatever the attitudes of your former employers, I want you to know that your work ethic is appreciated here. Perhaps it goes without saying, but this is rather more than a nine to five gig! We take our work seriously, and it's good work. It's good to bring in someone who gets it. After you."

We were there, at the door to a gray cinderblock of a building. The Warden gestured to a scanner by the door, and I held my new ID badge up to it. There was a beep, then a click, then the door opened. I stepped in and blinked at my surroundings. I'd expected scuffed tile, harsh lighting, which were there, sure, but it should have been something spare and uncomfortable. It wasn't exactly five stars, but there was a lobby, with comfortable looking chairs and rugs and a goddamn pool table.

I had a similar experience with my room. *My* room. From the word "barracks," I'd expected lines of bunk beds in a drafty hall, but I had a bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe, even a TV monitor on the wall. And no sign of any other occupant.

"Bathroom's down the hall, you can't miss it," the Warden said. "I'll leave you alone to start to settle in, and meet you in the lobby in two hours for your tour." Then they actually put their hand on my shoulder, like the kids' coach in some goddamn inspiring sports movie. "Welcome to the team."

There was a heist about five years ago that required me to hide in the vents of a resort satellite for just over a week. Between periods of intense observation were longer periods of intense boredom, when I reviewed my directives, did isometric exercises, and covered every scrap of paper on my person in doodles. I had a deadline, but no real way of knowing exactly when it would end.

I knew when this would end. It wasn't any easier.

I tried climbing into my bunk and sleeping, trying to ensure I stayed fresh, but any rest I might have achieved was precluded by my cellmate's constant recitation.

"You do have a way with words, don't you?" I called softly down to the bottom bunk. "What's your name?" I asked, not caring about the answer, but hoping I could at least hear something besides *that* .

"…Fill you with the faults they had…"

"Excellent," I said. "Nice to meet you, Phil. I'm Marquess." It would do, I supposed.

There was something humorous, almost, about keeping a key locked up. It was here, according to the captain, because Janus was the most secure establishment in the galaxy. It should be, if it were to hold the object whose purpose was to secure the Curemother Prime. And it certainly lived up to its reputation; the algorithm the prison used to

schedule deliveries and, by that token, lower the shields, was so convoluted as to look completely random to an outside observer. Thank goodness for Rita, who figured it out in half an hour. Even then, Juno had looked impressed with the algorithm. “Doesn’t usually take her that long,” he’d said. “The hell kind of a beast are we taking on?”

I missed him. I went longer stretches of time (occasionally) without seeing him on the ship, and of course I would *survive* being apart until tomorrow night. I’d *survived* being apart from him for over a year, and had mostly managed to push my memories of him to the back of my mind without it affecting my work. Mostly.

This wasn’t at all the same.

I decided to get some stretches in and had started to climb down when I felt a twinge in my back, sharp and unforgiving, where I’d been kicked. It caught me off guard, and I didn’t quite manage to contain my gasp of pain.

“So you got the welcome wagon, then?” Rowan called.

“One guard wagon,” I replied. “His time got cut short, but he was thorough.”

“Wasn’t Prentice, was it?”

“How did you know?”

“It sounds like him,” she said. “Fights alone, thorough, always manages to be free when someone new shows up. Not always him,

mind. But from what I can tell, he tends to do the most damage on his own." Then, quieter, as though she'd turned away, "I'm having a conversation. I'm helping. You want the new guy to have a worse time?"

"If your roommate is trying to sleep, we can talk later," I said.

Rowan laughed. "Roommate! I like that."

"I should rest, myself." I held back from making a quip about beauty sleep; Salvador Marquess did not care about beauty, and for the time being, Marquess was all I was.

I'd brought one duffel bag with me, enough to be plausible for someone with few worldly possessions but not so much that I'd be hurting when I had to leave it behind. When we got here, I'd left it at the security checkpoint, and someone had brought it to my room. I'd stayed in hotels with worse service. And… there was nothing to do but unpack. Took me about a minute.

So that gave me an hour and fifty-nine minutes to sit with my thoughts. Never a good thing.

I tried the monitor: looked like some daytime soaps and a news channel. I started pacing, looking out the window at the whole lot of gray outside. I even looked through my comms, hoping I didn't break it. To my surprise, I found a solitaire game. Plutonian, not Jovian, but easy enough to figure out. I flipped back to one of the daytime soaps, turned the volume down low, and sat down on the bed to play

solitaire. If I looked at my comms screen and nothing else, it was almost like being back in the office with Rita.

By the time I headed to the lobby, I'd managed to calm down, just a bit. Just in time to spend a few tense hours with my new evil boss.

"Ready to go?" The Warden was waiting for me, leaning against the pool table. Okay, remember, Steel—uh, *Roux*—you're a terrible person on the right side of the law, you've never seen a map of Janus, and you're enthusiastic about getting to abuse some new prisoners.

"Yeah, let's… go see this place," I said. So much for enthusiasm.

They just laughed. "Let's." I followed them out and they tapped the roof of one of those buggies that had passed us on our way here. "We're going to 'see this place' in style."

"Seatbelt on, Roux," they said when we'd gotten in. "Safety first!" I did not roll my eyes as I clicked the belt into place, and I wished I had someone there to appreciate my restraint. (Ha.) The buggy didn't have doors, so I probably would have put it on anyway.

"Let's start with E," the Warden said, "since we're here." E was a tower, a wide cylindrical building maybe fifteen, twenty stories tall. Hard to tell with no exterior windows. I could see one door and I'm not sure how many tunnels branching off the wall like veins. Some of them, I saw, disappeared into the ground.

"Are all the cellblocks connected to each other?" I asked as they parked the buggy. The map hadn't shown any such thing, but I'd known already that we hadn't gotten the whole picture. We might actually be able to use this.

“Mm, indirectly, all the buildings are,” the Warden said. “Bit of a maze in there, but you could get anywhere you needed to go with enough time.” They pushed open the door and I followed them in.

The first thing that hit me, as my eyes adjusted to the lower light, was the silence. It wasn’t just quiet— it was as if the air had been full of whispers that cut off when the door opened, and their ghosts were still hovering above our heads. I followed the Warden into the middle of the space, where a smaller tower walled in smoked glass stood. I’d read about this design. Hadn’t heard of it’s implementation outside of the Fascist Renaissance, but I was beginning to get an idea of just how many things I hadn’t heard about this place.

There was no central roof and no real floor to speak of. My boots crunched through rocky soil as I looked up at the cells. For a second, I thought they were empty, but then a small movement on the next level up caught my eye. The turn of a man’s head, tall enough that I could see him even pressed against the back wall of his cell. He looked terrified.

“Stairs are over there, elevator is back over here,” the Warden was saying. “Cell numbers are right next to the lock. They’re all set up like this, so we don’t have to bother going into all of them. That would take us all day.” I heard their footsteps retreating behind me and followed them out the door. “Feel free to explore the tunnels on your off time, though! Some of them give you a more direct route, and I find them rather peaceful.”

“Wait, you said they connect all the buildings,” I said.

“Correct.”

“Even… the barracks? Your own quarters?”

“I did say all the buildings.” They looked amused.

“I just mean—why would you want that? If anyone can use them.”

“My employees respect my space, just as I respect theirs,” they said, getting back into the buggy. “I can always lock up my building, of course, but I rarely bother; the tunnels don’t lead to any rooms that are off-limits. And as I said, I find them quite peaceful. I enjoy having my staff around immensely, but sometimes, you just need to take a walk in a quiet place.”

“Sure,” I said, aware that I was probably asking too many questions and should have dropped it. “But if anyone can use them, how do you know you won’t run into—”

“I don’t, of course,” they said. “But I’ve heard the tunnels described as ‘stuffy,’ even ‘claustrophobic.’ I’ve been told by the staff in no uncertain terms that the majority of the time, they prefer to conduct their travel aboveground.” They glanced over at me and… grinned? “Of course, you’re perfectly welcome to use them yourself. Maybe we’ll run into each other.” *That* was enough to put me off the tunnels for good. Besides, they’d begun to remind me uncomfortably of a tube maze.

We passed several more cellblocks, running down the alphabet, as the Warden kept up a stream of something about the history of Janus. I made a mental note of our surroundings when we passed J block. Then we came up on a long, squat building, only two stories tall, with no signage.

“What’s that building?” I said, interrupting their spiel about being able

to tell what order the cellblocks were built in by the material of the outer walls, rather than their letter designations.

"Oh, that's one of our testing facilities," they said. I was about to ask what they tested when I stopped myself. They'd sounded so matter-of-fact, like I was already supposed to know about this. If I'd really been a guard transferring over from another prison, I might. I resolved to ask someone about it later, in a way that wouldn't give up the game. "You'll get a closer look tomorrow when you shadow Prentice. He's a diligent kid, you'll get a good introduction."

"Great," I said, looking back as we drove away from it. I don't put much stock in things that can't be proven or demonstrated, but I'm also not in the habit of ignoring a hunch, and the feeling I got from that place… it wasn't good.

It didn't take me long to learn the rest of my cellmate's favorite poem. He really did recite it all the time; if he drifted off to sleep, he'd wake up with a start and pick up exactly where he left off. Disconcerting, but impressive. Apart from that, there was only the irregular sound of cell doors opening and slamming shut in nearby cellblocks to catch my attention.

Until I heard Rowan speak again. "Marquess, you awake?"

I climbed down and went over to the wall between our cells. "I'm awake."

"You hear that?"

“The doors?”

“Can’t stand it.”

“Why?”

There was a pause. “You do know about this place?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Is this your first time behind bars or something? You must have done something real fucked up to get thrown in here right away.” I opened my mouth, hoping I could think of something to say that wouldn’t give me away, but Rowan continued. “Sorry, that’s not—it’s none of my business. I just mean, I thought this was the bogeyman of prisons. ‘You think it’s bad here? Make sure you don’t get sent to Janus.’”

It was too late to cover my blunder. But was it mine, really? If there was something so exceptional about this place, shouldn’t it be the captain’s and Rita’s responsibility to find the information? But I’ve traveled the galaxy for most of my life; if there was something I needed to know about Janus, perhaps I should have already known it. I couldn’t stay silent for much longer. “I don’t know about it.”

“Shit. Okay.” Rowan didn’t say anything, and a distant cell door slammed shut.

“Rowan?”

“Yeah, just. Never had to explain it before. I wish I weren’t the one telling you.” There was another pause. “The reason you can hear all those cells opening and closing one after another like that is because it’s time for a test.”

“Test?”

“Medical experiments. That’s why we’re here. A moon full of people no one will miss means a virtually unlimited number of test subjects.”

It wasn’t as though I could hear the screams of the other inmates as their bodies were flooded with mysterious chemicals, nothing so dramatic. But in the spaces between the sounds of clanging doors, I wondered. Were they too far away to hear? Were they in soundproofed rooms? Or were they dying or losing consciousness before they could cry out? Perhaps they were so resigned to their fate that they no longer reacted in such a way. Perhaps they never had.

“What… do they test?” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“You think they tell us? Sometimes it’s drugs, sometimes I think they’re just looking at our reactions to stimuli. There’s usually some kind of grace period for each block, probably so the tests don’t interfere with each other, but damned if I could tell you how long that is. I don’t think it’s always the same amount of time between them, either. Doesn’t feel like it, anyway.”

I stood at the wall for a while. I wish I could say I was thinking of a plan, but I was just frozen. Somehow, a privately owned prison moon had managed to hide one of the more gruesome human rights violations I’d ever heard of from our extremely capable hacker, and now I was in the lion’s den for the next two days with no way of

getting out early if I needed to. There was Juno, of course, but how much could he do without blowing our cover? No, I decided, no sense in both of us getting hurt if we could avoid it. I didn't even know whether or not he knew about this yet.

"I'm gonna try to sleep," Rowan said from the other side of the wall.

"All right," I said. I didn't say "thank you for telling me," and she didn't say "sorry"—what would be the point? I just stood there until my legs started to ache from the tension in them, and then I climbed back up into bed.

I've never had a particular aversion to needles, never had a problem with pills, but I've also made a point of never being at the mercy of controlled substances. I've taken cold medicine, bone-knitting serum, and painkillers when necessary, of course, had the occasional drink when a job required it or when I was sure of my safety. And with all the other aspects of this job to consider, this was the one I would fully permit myself not to think about. I couldn't do anything to avoid it, and I couldn't do anything to mitigate the effects if it happened. I couldn't foresee anything on this score at all.

I tried folding it away, wrestling the knowledge into a more manageable size and shape, but the edges of it escaped me. Whether it was the idea itself that defied such compartmentalization, or whether I had well and truly lost my former ability, it remained at the forefront of my mind, vast and horrific. There was no way to pare it down or make it easier to hold. So I simply huddled in my bunk, pulling the blankets over my head and hoping the bogeyman would take someone else.

Chapter End Notes

The poem quoted here is "This Be The Verse" by Philip Larkin:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hell is empty, all the devils are here, and they have blasters.

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, human rights violations, needles, seizures

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I couldn't sleep that night. I'd brought up the tests earlier in the mess hall, sitting with some of the other guards. I still had to be cagey about it, so I didn't find out nearly as much as I wanted. The tests were conducted every day, but any one guard was only on duty for them once every few days. They were occasionally "eventful," whatever that entailed, but it didn't sound like there was a lot to them. I nodded along and pretended all my questions were answered, all while realizing I'd gotten just enough information and a sense of foreboding to keep me up at night. And hey, look, I was right. Or maybe it was more that I'd already gotten unused to sleeping alone.

I tried to sleep in every position I could think of, including at a ninety-degree angle with my legs against the wall. Finally, I had to face it; it wasn't going to happen. I rolled out of bed and pulled on a t-shirt and sweatpants. A walk usually helped me clear my head at night; let's see if it worked in a place with no city noise that might actually be hell itself.

The lights were on in the hallway, but dimmed, which automatically made it fancier than any apartment I'd ever lived in. The lobby had the same lighting situation, and I was just thinking that shooting pool in a dimly lit room would be a great way to feel terrible about my aim, a voice spoke up from the shadows.

"Come here often?"

I instinctively crouched and reached for a blaster that wasn't on my hip, but the voice just… giggled?

"Sorry to spook you. You're the new guy, yeah?"

"Yeah," I said, hoping I was speaking louder than my heart was beating. "Cassidy Roux."

"New Roux!" He stood up from an armchair in the corner and stepped forward. He was compact and wiry, with close-cropped hair and a grin that flashed in the low light. "Unless you prefer Cassidy? Cass?"

"Roux's fine," I said. "And, uh, you are?"

"Prentice," he said. "Liv Prentice. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Uh, yeah, you too." Prentice—I knew that name, but as I was still caught up in the (hopefully irrational) fear of ambush it took me a second to remember why. The Warden was not exaggerating when they called him a kid. How old could he be, 25, 26?

"Where you going?" Prentice said. I'd been unconsciously backing away, but now that he'd called attention to it, I froze. I actually froze, like a kid caught smoking behind the middle school.

"It's late," I said. Smart. Smooth. Very believable.

"You're wandering around in the dead of night," he said. "I know an

insomniac when I see one. Play a game of pool?"

"Yeah, I think the adrenaline spike from a few seconds ago has worn off. Suddenly, I'm feeling really tired."

"I get that a lot." He finally broke focus from me to rummage around for the pool balls and I found myself breathing normally again. "I'll probably be up for a while if you change your mind. Otherwise, see you in the morning, shadow!" This time, when he flashed that grin at me, I was able to smile back like a normal person and walk calmly back to my room.

For all the sleep I didn't get that night, I made up with too much coffee too early in the morning. The mess hall was mostly empty, third shift not yet having ended and first still an hour or so away, so I made it there and back without speaking to anyone. Which gave me plenty of time to think about the twelve hours standing between me and my scariest assignment since that time in the HCPD when I got sent to a fireworks factory to arrest an arsonist.

Just when I thought I'd be stewing long enough to shave off my own eyebrows, there was a knock at the door. Well, a few knocks. One, then three in quick succession, then one more. Was that supposed to be something? Whatever. I opened the door.

"Hey, there you are." I heard him before I saw him. In the fully-bright hall lights, his purple buzz cut practically glowed; combined with the electric blue eyeliner, the effect was radioactive. An attempt to offset the endless gray and black? "I'll call this our first proper meeting, when I'm not scaring you out of your skin. Welcome to the team!" This whole "team" thing was getting a little creepy. I wasn't sure if we were supposed to be baseball players or minimum-wage grocery store cashiers, but neither seemed like great parallels to a prison guard stint.

“I’d ask how you slept, but I think I can tell. Better get moving, we don’t want to be late!” I was about to get into the buggy parked outside the door of the barracks when Prentice stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Nah, that’s not for us. We’re walking. This way!”

If I hadn’t known he’d been awake in the dead of night, I wouldn’t have guessed. If I hadn’t known he was an on-duty prison guard, I wouldn’t have guessed that, either. I couldn’t tell if he was way too into his job or if I was just getting old. Well, almost certainly the former. Probably a hearty dose of the latter too, I thought as I tried to stretch the knots in my neck. I tried to think of the least weird way to ask him what exactly we’d be doing.

“Hey,” I said, trying to sound casual. “What’s on the docket?”

“Oh,” Prentice said, like he was surprised I didn’t know. “It’s test day!” He laughed. “Well, every day is test day. But today is one of ours.”

“Right, yeah,” I said. Okay, you know what? I was either going to have to be more blunt, or be surprised. I hate surprises, and I didn’t think this was going to be an exception. “So, what exactly is the test? Today, I mean.”

Prentice looked surprised again. “I mean, we don’t know. We’re not supposed to know what we’re testing. We usually don’t even find out later, but sometimes the company will send over a gift basket or something, once their product’s out on the market. That’s always nice —they’re definitely generous. Everybody gets something, even if you didn’t help out on their test. That’s how I got this watch!” He pushed his sleeve up to reveal a square-faced watch that matched his eyeliner perfectly. “It’s a lot of watches, to be honest,” he said conspiratorially. “But it’s still nice, you know? This one’s my favorite. It’s waterproof.”

“I don’t care about the fucking watches,” I wanted to say. Instead, I just said, “Nice.” Anyway, this hadn’t been a complete waste. I knew the prison was being bankrolled by some pharmaceutical megacorps for more than just storing the Key. And if we were “helping out” on tests for them—

My thought was cut short when I saw we’d arrived. It was one of the towering cellblocks; the small plaque next to the door simply read “J.” My stomach dropped. More guards were arriving, in buggies and on foot, and I told myself to calm down. It was a massive building and even if this was where they were keeping Nureyev, it’s not like this had anything to do with him. Not that that helped. I already knew whatever we’d be doing here, it wasn’t going to be good.

And what I told myself, about it having nothing to do with Nureyev? Occasionally, I like to indulge in optimism. Indulgence never was a good look on me.

I was doing my stretches when the doors crashed open and footfalls crunching through the soil echoed in the cellblock, and for a single, blissful moment, I didn’t know what was happening. Then I realized, and my blood froze in my veins. *Someone else, take someone else,* the selfish voice in the back of my head pleaded. No one was listening.

“Hands to the bars,” the guard outside said. I knew that voice; I almost felt like laughing. A few hundred guards crawling over the face of this rock, and I came into contact with Prentice again? And he was *using his words* this time, wasn’t that novel. I thought of telling him, thanks ever so, but I was fine right here. He could come in and get me if he liked. But even if I still had the use of my hands for the next few moments, there was no way I could fight the next guard who came for me, and, if I was lucky, the next one after that. Perhaps outside of

windowless hallways, he would have to show some decorum?

"Zero zero eight five four seven," Prentice snapped. "Hands to the bars, now." So easy to get into trouble. Just stand still long enough. Well, Marquess was a troublemaker, wasn't he? But I didn't push it. I held my hands outside the bars so he could cuff me, tighter than was strictly necessary, and then the door opened.

The intake of breath immediately to my left was quiet, but familiar enough to draw my attention. I turned to look and there he was. We held eye contact for a second, too long, perhaps, but I felt I owed myself something. *We* owed ourselves something.

We owed ourselves more than we could have at the moment.

"Face front, Marquess," Juno said. His tone was harsh, but no one here besides Rowan had called me anything but my number. I hoped the tone was enough to make up for the discrepancy in address; it really was an unnecessary risk. I appreciated it all the same.

"You heard the lady," said Prentice, and I remembered Buddy saying that no prison in their right mind would send someone of Juno's stature to escort a prisoner of Jet's size. Even without heels, I had nearly a foot on my new friend; perhaps I could get away with a bit of menacing—in character, of course. I had just about decided to do something (not what the something was, so as not to telegraph my movements) when I felt a current go through the cuffs. Just a small one, but enough to hurt a little. Well, that was one way of getting people to fall in line.

It wasn't a long walk to the cinderblock of a building that was waiting for us. They marched us inside, to a long drafty hall lined with metal chairs. I saw the line of prisoners ahead of me get pushed down into the chairs one by one, and then I was being shoved down, too, and

from somewhere behind me and off to the side came the sound of several pairs of heels, clacking on the tile. People in white scrubs, faces impassive, moved to the seated prisoners, bowing over their arms. I looked around for a way out, but with the cuffs still on and the wall of guards in front of us, there wasn't one. To my left was a woman of indeterminate age with bright orange hair that had grown out unevenly, as though one side of her head had been shaved months ago and left alone since. She looked back at me with none of the panic I felt, but with a resigned kind of fear that this time would be the one that got her.

"Rowan?" I tried to mouth at her.

"Eyes *front*, 008547!" I complied, anticipating the shock through the cuffs, but it never came. Perhaps it was too close to the test to take that chance. The guards all had blasters, anyway, if anyone became too unruly.

One of the people in white tied an elastic tight around my bicep, and at that moment I realized the cuffs were so tight, I was losing feeling in my fingers. There wasn't much time to consider that, however, as I felt the sting of a needle in my forearm. The nurse, I supposed, pressed a strip of adherent gauze to the place where the needle had entered my arm and began to depress the syringe. As I watched the liquid in the syringe empty into me, I felt something go horribly wrong.

The second the needle left Nureyev's arm, he started twitching. For one shameful second, I thought it was an act. But his eyes rolled back in his head, and I moved as fast as I could to catch him before he hit the floor.

“Roux, what the hell?”

“He’s having a seizure!” I snapped. All I could do was hold Nureyev’s head as his muscles clenched and went slack, over and over, and fight the urge to whisper soothing things to a man who may or may not have been able to hear them.

“Hey, we’re not supposed to interfere—”

“I’m not slipping him an aspirin, I’m making sure he doesn’t die.” Still, as Nureyev stopped moving and I checked his neck for a pulse, I brushed the pads of my fingers over the skin there for just a moment, the only assurance I could give in this den of wolves.

Nureyev’s eyes fluttered open, but I didn’t have much time to feel relieved before I saw his lips start to form my name.

“You still with us, Marquess?” I barked, and saw Nureyev’s eyes change as he remembered where we were and who we were supposed to be. It was a relief, sure, but I hated it. “Get up.” I pulled Nureyev up and put him back in the chair. After that, there was nothing else to do but join the other guards again. Prentice was giving me a skeptical look out of the corner of his eye. I wanted to do something about it, but I was so mad and scared that I knew I shouldn’t, not right now.

Apart from Prentice trying to stop me, Nureyev’s seizure and my outburst hadn’t stopped or even slowed down the proceedings at all. The prisoner I’d brought in had already been injected, and I felt guilty for not noticing. Her eyes were fixed on the floor in front of her and her face was tensed and red, but otherwise she didn’t move or react.

I tried to watch both of them. Some of the other guards talked around me, and I heard them but didn’t process what they were saying. I

know I should have paid more attention but if I tried to focus on everything I could feel it all unraveling at the edges and getting away from me and why was everything so bright and so loud and why didn't I do more for him…

Breathe, Steel.

I watched Nureyev, who seemed to be all limbs and no muscles, slumped almost to the point of falling out of his chair. Sweat made his hair stick to his forehead and his eyes moved like he was trying to catch hold of any detail to grab onto and failing. The woman next to him, who I'd brought in, had her eyes squeezed shut, and her breathing looked too deliberate but regular enough. At least one out of the two people I was supposed to be watching hadn't ended up on the floor. The thought didn't make me feel better.

I latched onto a remark I'd heard from one of the guards: observation. I knew where that was, or at least, I remembered a small block of cells on the map marked with some word starting with "o" and that was probably it, right? We each retrieved our prisoners at the end of the trial. I nearly offered to help Prentice with Nureyev, really so that I could do it in a way that didn't hurt him, but ostensibly because Nureyev was so much taller. But Prentice just hefted him to his feet and nodded at one of the nurses. Together, they carried him. Prentice looked over at me and the woman with the orange hair and said, "You know you can make those cuffs tighter." Then he looked at me, and I knew the unspoken end to that sentence was "unless you've gone soft."

"Oh," I said, trying to think quickly. "Different regulations, you know how it is, you get used to one thing…" I thought *I'm sorry* at the woman as hard as I could, and then I tightened her handcuffs. I thought, even if you didn't care about these people at all, how was it best practice to cut off their circulation? Wouldn't that affect the tests? But Prentice's behavior had nothing to do with his job, beyond the fact that the job let him get away with it.

I left her there in her cell, hoping she'd be okay. As okay as she could be.

The rest of my shift passed in a blur. Handing out meal trays to different cell blocks (not to J; they couldn't eat for the rest of the day), getting more familiar with the blaster I'd been given. Well, that Cassidy Roux had been given. It packed more punch than I was really comfortable with. Not quite at full kill strength, but close enough to be worrying, and with only one setting. Hopefully I wouldn't need it, but well, with my luck, tomorrow could go a lot more chaotic than I'd like.

It did help that when I regained control of my body, Juno was holding me. Not much, under the circumstances, but I'd take what I could get. Even if he had to talk to me like that. I knew that he was playing a part to keep us safe. Still, there was some buried deep part of me, some soft animal that wanted to shy away from him. Stupid. I knew.

Still.

"Take him away to observation," I heard someone say distantly from the chair Juno had dragged me back into. "After we're done." It felt like an awfully long time that I sat there, weak and shaking.

"Observation" turned out to be something more akin to "solitary," but with an obvious camera pointed through the cell door. Something defiant welled up in me and I tried to stare it down, but I could only manage it for a minute before fatigue claimed me and I collapsed in a heap in the corner. Rest is good, I told myself. Soon enough, Rita would be turning off the cameras and Juno would come to let me out

so we could get what we came for. And today my rest wouldn't be interrupted by incessant poetry. This was fine. I told myself over and over, as tears streamed over the bridge of my nose and dripped down onto the dirt on the floor, that it was fine. I didn't believe it, but I did eventually get to sleep, which I suppose was the next best thing.

"Hey, it's time." A sound cut through the fog of sleep, a voice I'd been dreaming of, but… no, this was all wrong. This voice belonged to safety and warmth and wherever I was waking up now contained neither. I was cold and every part of me ached; if I moved I could feel the scraping of dirt under me. Perhaps they'd recorded his voice to torment me; perhaps they had him too. I took stock of my limbs as best I could without making obvious movements—I felt too weak to fight an unknown foe. Perhaps this was it for both of us, and I could do nothing.

I heard metal on metal, like a door opening, and soft footsteps scraped along the ground towards me. If only I could remember where my glasses had gone, if only I knew where I was—

"Ransom. Peter. Marquess." All at once I remembered where we were and what we were doing. I managed to open my eyes. Juno was crouched in front of me, holding my glasses in one hand and, in the other, a flashlight pointed at the ground. I could see the concern in his face by what little light spilled up. "It's time." He gave me the glasses and offered his hand to help me to my feet, but maybe because of the last time I'd seen him, maybe because of my shame at being caught asleep and off my guard, I pushed off the ground and got to my feet without him.

"Good to see you, detective," I said, trying for capable and ending up at hollow. "I'll lead, shall I?" He nodded and handed me the light, and we were off.

His breathing was quiet but still audible as I took us along the route Buddy had plotted with us before the mission, with the adjustments

needed for my change in location. I was alert but relaxed; this felt like me. Sneaking through the dark, with a plan and a treasure to steal. A familiar comfort in a place that was neither familiar nor comfortable.

"Nu- Rans-" Juno sighed behind me. "I'm sorry."

Now? He wanted to do this *now?* "For what, detective?"

"For—you *know* what!" he said. "This afternoon."

"And why is that?"

"You had a seizure."

"And you did that to me?" I was being brusque, I knew. But time was of the essence, and we couldn't waste it.

"No, but I—"

"I can tell this is difficult for you, but frankly, we do not have the time."

"Goddamn it, I know!" I turned at his words, hearing his voice tighten. He wasn't so far gone, at least, to actually shout, but it sounded like it had been a close thing. "I know we don't really have time now, and I know this is important, but honestly I could let the job go to hell and throw this whole stupid moon down after it. I hate this so goddamn much."

“So do I, or were you unaware?” I said. I knew this was a terrible idea, but at least I wasn’t the one to break first. “I am living my nightmares, Juno. This was the sword hanging over my head, and now it’s fallen.”

“So am I!” he said. “Someone once—and I—” he took a breath and shook his head. “Sorry. It’s not the same, I know. I shouldn’t have… I just need to remember we’re getting out of here tomorrow.”

I should have dropped it. “Unless something goes wrong.”

“What?”

“In which case, the contingency plan is to leave me here.”

“No, no fucking way, Buddy wouldn’t—”

“Buddy hasn’t said anything about it. It’s just common sense. What better place to leave a thief who falls behind than a prison? I suppose in the absolute worst case scenario, you would also be stuck, but if something goes wrong and you can’t get to me in time, the only thing to do is leave me and get yourself back to the ship.”

“If you think for a second that I would just leave you—”

“And what’s so special about this time?” I hadn’t meant to say it, I was sure, but from Juno’s stricken expression, I was equally sure that there was no use pretending I hadn’t. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No, I get it.” He didn’t meet my eyes, and frankly, I didn’t blame him. “I guess we’d better go.” He was right; of course he was. The important thing was the job.

It was a low blow, sure, but I didn’t blame him. I guess that’s not a thing you ever entirely get over—forgive, maybe, but not forget. Anyway, it had the effect of startling me back into the present, and we were on a tight schedule.

We finally reached the building that housed the Warden’s personal office and living quarters. Outside, it looked as gray and bleak as the rest of it. Inside…

Inside there were paintings, ornate rugs, and what looked like real wood paneling. It seemed like wherever I looked, there was some other casual display of wealth. “Goddamn it. I don’t know why I’m even surprised.”

“This is only the entryway, dear—” The way Nureyev cut himself off hurt, but we didn’t have time for that. “It’s only going to get worse from here.” I nodded and we kept moving.

The next room was a library and even gaudier than the entryway. Bookcases with carved flourishes I could just make out in the low light stretched floor to ceiling in rows across the room. It looked like they lined the walls, too, and all of them were filled with old-fashioned books bound in either woven cloth or leather. It could have been imitation leather, but still, just having this many physical books in one place spoke to a kind of wealth I’d seen before, and it had never been a sign of generosity or egalitarianism.

“You think they read these?” I whispered.

“I’m honestly wondering how many of them have been opened,” Nureyev said. A sound came from behind us: an opening door. Together, we dove behind a shelf and flattened ourselves against the floor as much as we could.

Two guards came in with flashlights, heading toward the office. They seemed relaxed enough that I didn’t think they’d seen us, but it must have been close.

“You know, I actually don’t mind?” one of them was saying to the other. “I mean, I know it’s technically an annoyance, equipment not functioning properly, sure, but I haven’t been through here in a while. It’s nice.”

“Yeah, well,” the other guard said, “you could always just come in to borrow a book.” I stopped breathing; they sounded closer than they should, much closer than they were a moment ago.

“I could,” the first guard said, their voice softer and more distant than the other’s had been. It sounded like they were splitting up to search the library. I locked eyes with Nureyev; we wouldn’t move now, wouldn’t take unnecessary risks, but we had to be ready to take them down if it came to that.

“Don’t say, ‘who has the time,’” the second guard said. “You get as much time off as everyone else.” Now the sound came from clear across the room. This didn’t make any sense.

“I know, I know…” They went into the office and we stayed put until

we heard them come through again, their footsteps and conversation echoing strangely. A door opened and closed and we were alone in the library again. It could have been a trap, so we waited even longer to get up, but no. They had gone out the door we'd come in. Something about this room wasn't right.

"That was—"

"Strange, I know," Nureyev interrupted.

"I was going to say 'close,' but yeah, strange," I said. "The sound. Makes sense that they'd have patrols running if the cameras went down, though, we'll have to be careful."

"When am I anything but?" Nureyev said, and I smiled before I remembered he was probably still angry and anyway, we needed to get a move on.

"Here. Gloves." He put them on and we made our way into the office. Nureyev started his sweep for bugs and I figured I was good to keep watch. Not that there was anything to watch. With the lights off and a patrol just come through, we wouldn't be having company. So I kept an ear out and watched Nureyev instead. He was sweeping the room for bugs and apparently coming up empty. It felt like a treat, like a privilege, watching him work like this, now that I knew him. Seeing him so entirely focused, knowing that he can disregard everything but the job because I'm watching his back, it meant a lot. We didn't have time right now, but I wanted to let him know that I understood, that he had me as long as he needed.

Once his sweep was done, he backtracked to the painting. It was big and oddly off-center in a room that had no other paintings or photos on its walls, the kind of thing that might as well have said "Lift here for safe." It was abstract, long swipes of thick paint crossing the

canvas; it was hard to tell, but it looked like it might have been done in all neutrals. It was hideous. I loved it.

Nureyev's hand found the catch immediately and the painting swung away from the wall to reveal the safe we'd known would be there. There was an old analog dial on the front of it, right behind the center of the painting. As the lock clicked open, I got the feeling that this had been too easy.

"Did you get it?" I said.

"A decoy, perhaps." Nureyev put his arm in the safe and I could see him moving it around, probably feeling for false panels. "There are certainly other places to hide it."

"Yeah, that's what worries me," I said, looking around the room. There didn't seem to be many, luckily; there were no bookshelves in here, just the painting and the desk and the rug. The latter caught Nureyev's attention and he started feeling for the edges of a trapdoor, knocking, listening for an echo. "If you haven't found it there by now —"

"Patience, please, detective." But the last few knocks he tried didn't offer up any secrets either.

"Maybe the desk."

"Yes, *thank you*, I'm aware of the desk," he said as he got to his feet.

"Sorry, just… anxious."

Nothing on the surface of the desk could have hidden anything of the size we were looking for, and he got to work on the drawers. He checked them one by one, efficient and methodical. I knew he knew what he was doing, but I still had to dig my fingernails into my hands to keep from pacing. “We’re about at the fifteen-minute mark, any luck yet?”

“Juno, when I find something, you will be the first person I tell.” On the fifth drawer he checked, I saw him freeze for a second. I was worried it had been booby-trapped somehow, but he stayed quiet and I could see his arm moving slowly and carefully. “There’s a false bottom to this one.” There was a soft click, and a few seconds later, he pulled out the Key.

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to run to him, pick him up, and spin him around. We actually found it, we did it, this wasn’t for nothing. For the first time since we’d landed on this godforsaken chunk of rock, he smiled at me, and I was struck all over again by just how beautiful he was.

“You had better hang onto it,” he said. “Pockets, and less of a chance of being searched.” I nodded and went to take it. His fingers brushed mine but he pulled his hand back quickly.

“I—” I needed to tell him, needed him to know, but there was so much and the words stuck in my throat.

“Perhaps later,” he said as he replaced the panel and other contents of the drawer. I had to say something.

“I won’t let anything else happen to you.” He met my eye again, looking almost surprised. I didn’t want him to be surprised at

something like that, but I couldn't blame him after the day he'd had, and after all, that's why I had to say it, right? So he'd know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I wasn't leaving him in hell.

"I know," he said after a second, and I was pretty sure he believed me. "But if we don't get moving now, neither of us will have much say in what happens next."

"Right," I said, and zipped the Key into a pocket. It would have to do for now. We made sure we left the office exactly as we'd found it, and made our way back to observation before the cameras came back on.

I hated leaving Nureyev there, but then, I hated this whole thing, so why break the streak?

Anyway, we'd done it. We'd gotten the Key, and now all that was left was to survive the next day. I really hoped that wouldn't be a tall order.

I should know by now that hopes like that exist to be dashed.

Everything was going fine, relatively speaking—I didn't have to collect inmates or monitor any more tests, and I found out Nureyev got moved back to his regular cell, which he was unlikely to leave before I got to him—until dinnertime. I was headed to the cafeteria when I got a ping on my officially issued, short-range comms from the only person whose frequency I had stored so far: the Warden.

"Dinner. Library. Skip the cafeteria."

They knew. This was it. They'd realized the Key was missing, or they'd had a camera on another network that Rita had missed, or we'd been spotted by a guard. The comms pinged again.

"Don't delay, the food will get cold."

I sighed and headed toward the Warden's building. If this was a trap, it was a bad one. If they really wanted to get me, they could just have any nearby guards take me down, no need to get their own hands dirty or make things more complicated. And trap or not, I couldn't ignore a message from the boss. Couldn't afford to look suspicious in case they were still in the dark about our operation.

Actually, it occurred to me that the Warden would definitely know by now, either by watching the footage or from a report, what had happened the day before with Nureyev and the test. They'd know I'd stuck my neck out for an inmate—that *Cassidy Roux* , the guard with a short fuse and a hole where his soul might have been once, had broken rank to keep an inmate from getting hurt. I couldn't regret doing it. There was nothing else I could have done. But it may have complicated things, and I couldn't be sure how much.

The Warden was waiting for me in the library, next to a small table set for two. A previously unconsidered, horrifying thought occurred to me: maybe this was supposed to be a date. I really, really hoped I was just in trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for hanging in there with me! I feel like I should have mentioned this earlier, but although I very rarely have the spoons to respond to comments individually, please know that I read and treasure all of them. Seriously. Thank you.

(Also, this chapter contains a possibly pretentious reference to a

book I hated reading in high school. Well, one on purpose. Probably not more than that, but if you found more than one, please tell me, I will laugh so hard at myself.)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Oh, no.

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic violence, blood and injury; concussion; playing slightly fast and loose with concussion symptoms; death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt as though I'd barely drifted off when I heard the lock click and the door open. I stayed still, hoping whoever it was would drop a meal tray on the ground and leave, or lead me back to "my" cell. Suddenly there was a bright light in my face and I threw up my arms to block it out; maybe that was the wrong move, but I don't know that it changed anything. Hands dragged me to my feet, I couldn't tell how many, and I blinked, trying to make my eyes adjust. I hadn't taken my glasses off to sleep, and somehow they were still on my face. Small miracles.

I stopped feeling fortunate when a punch caught me in the gut. I didn't fall; the fingers digging into my biceps saw to that. It hurt, of course, but I'd taken worse. The unfortunate difference was that usually, I was armed, and as such, was rarely hit by the same assailant twice. When I doubled over from the blow, a knee rose to meet me. I heard the crunch of breaking bone a moment before the pain sparked and caught fire in the middle of my face. I tried to deny what I knew to be the truth even as my eyes watered and I reeled backwards, still in the grip of the guards. There were two, I now knew, one at each arm. One of them kicked the back of my knee and I finally fell to the ground. A boot came down slowly, heavily on my back, pinning me against my own legs.

If they know what's good for them, I thought, *they'll continue to hide their faces, because otherwise I will kill every last one of them*. I struggled to breathe through my mouth as blood pooled in my broken nose, and I could just about see drops of water mark the dirt in front of me, unimpeded by my glasses. They must have come off when—

I squeezed my eyes shut for just a second. I didn't know how bad this was going to be, and if I was to make it out the other side, I couldn't spend my energy on thinking about the things I'd lost.

"New boy," said a voice above me, probably the one actually beating me. The voice was unfamiliar, but what with the events of the previous day and the blood pouring out of my nose, it was hardly surprising that I wouldn't recognize him. "Sorry we couldn't welcome you properly, but Prentice had that taken care of, didn't he? I heard his time was cut short, though. Don't worry, we're here to make up for that.

"Why'd you move, new boy? Did a little murder at your last place? They wouldn't let you stay? Were you too bad for them, new boy? Too tough?" The boot came off my back at the same time as a hand got into my hair and pulled. It hurt, but they'd forgotten about my arms. I've never been much of a brawler, but I know my way around unarmed combat well enough. I work with what I have.

I grabbed the ends of his collar with the opposite hands and pulled. The guard choked and his eyes bulged in surprise and pain and I savored it even as I pulled him sharply toward me for a headbutt. That hurt, and I decided I wouldn't be trying that ever again, but the guard's strangled moan of pain was worth it. He blinked at me and I made myself smile, baring bloodstained teeth that I hoped he'd see in his nightmares. Someone broke my hold on his collar and I was hit over and over from all sides, and all I could do was try to protect my face and, occasionally, throw an elbow. It was a punch to the jaw that got me, in the end. Before I knew it I was on the ground, conscious but dazed, wondering if anything else was broken.

Somewhere above me, I heard the leader say something that I couldn't quite decipher. Was he speaking a language I didn't know, or was I the problem? Had they hurt me so badly that they'd somehow scrambled the language center of my brain? They pulled me to my feet and wrenched my arms back, far enough to cuff me, but not so far that I

couldn't keep my arms close to my sides in a defensive posture. That was fine. The movement didn't dislodge the small plastic card I now had hidden under my shirt, pressed between my arm and my ribs.

I put down one foot in front of the other, all the way back, curled in on myself and watching my blood drip onto the ground and my jumpsuit. *Should I be tilting my head back?* I couldn't remember, but if I did, I risked dislodging the key (not to mention, baring my throat to my assailants). I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do with it, but as long as I had it, I had time to work that out.

I tried to stay on my feet when they pushed me into the cell; I succeeded for a few seconds before my body decided it had had enough and I dropped to my knees. They were shouting something behind me. I was sure now that they were speaking Solar, sure that the problem was me, sure that I'd be useless to Juno and to Buddy and to the rest of the family, and that thought combined with my inability to understand what was being shouted kept me on the ground. Eventually, I heard their shoes scrape the concrete and fade away.

Which was when Phil started back in on his recitation.

At first I was sure it was something new, because I didn't recognize the words. It meant nothing to me. I'd heard his poem over and over… and that's how I realized there was just the one, when I could follow the familiar cadence and meter, but not the meaning of the words themselves. My head throbbed, and blood dripped into my throat, and though I couldn't decipher the familiar words of the poem, I understood my situation all too well. I was finished.

“Roux!” they said, with that inexhaustible cheer. “Good to see you! Have a seat.”

I sat down at the table (no candles, good sign, although that could have just been because of the fire hazard). The plates held pasta and broccoli in sauce with a cut of meat on the side—okay, so a little fancier than the stuff they served in the cafeteria, but it seemed pretty in-line with the building. The Warden probably ate like this every night. It wasn’t special. Probably.

“Are you going to eat, or do you just want to stare at it?” I jumped and the Warden chuckled. “Well, I’m not going to wait for you.” They twirled the long noodles onto their fork and ate them with a smile. I decided I might as well eat, and, you know, hope it wasn’t poisoned.

It was good, actually. I didn’t enjoy it, but I could tell the food was good.

“So I want to know,” the Warden said, lazily pointing their fork at me, “how you’re settling in.”

This couldn’t be just small talk, I thought. I’d gotten this before; they wanted to try to lull me into a false sense of security and then get me when I wasn’t expecting it. That didn’t work on me, and they weren’t even particularly good at it. “I’m guessing this is because of the experiment yesterday?”

“Hmm?”

“Marquess’s seizure,” I said, suddenly less sure. “My breaking rank to make sure he didn’t crack his skull open.”

“Oh, no, nothing of the kind!” The Warden said, stabbing a broccoli floret on the end of their fork. “This is standard for new employees, didn’t anyone tell you?”

“I didn’t ask,” I admitted. “Didn’t want to let people know if I was in trouble.”

“Well, don’t you worry about that,” they said. “True, standard procedure is to simply observe—as a guard, your only real responsibility during these sessions is to transport the subjects to and from, and make sure they don’t get unruly. But of course, if the inmate had, as you put it, ‘cracked his skull open,’ it would have been a result, but not a very telling one. A seizure is one thing, but being able to observe the aftereffects—more seizures, sustained loss of motor control, migraines, perhaps—is far more valuable. That was quick thinking; nice work, Roux.”

“Sure,” I said. “I mean, thanks.”

“You don’t much like talking about yourself, do you? It’s fine, I just want you to enjoy your dinner and to give you carte blanche to raise any concerns you may have.” I tried not to jump when they said “carte blanche.” It’s just an expression. No reason to assume one of the creepiest people I’d ever met knew exactly who I was and what I was doing. “Fair warning, though, I may talk your ear off!” The Warden laughed, and the sound echoed in a way that, in a space so full of insulating material, shouldn’t have been possible.

“I’ve been doing some reading,” they said from across the small table. Well, that answered my question from the night before. “I’ve never been much for fiction, but I do rather like history and essays. It’s become a bit of a vice, I suppose.” They waved their hand at the room around them, smiling like an aristocrat who’d just been asked about money. “Do you read, Roux?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “Spent most of my time at work back on Rosalind, my lifestyle didn’t lend itself so well to hobbies.”

“I know I can be a bit of a workaholic,” the Warden said, “but I try not to push my own weaknesses onto my staff. And if you ever want to borrow any books, please feel free! I only ask that you sign them out, and back in when you’re done.” They looked at the shelf nearest them and suddenly tapped their fork hard on their plate, looking lost in thought. I jumped, then cursed myself for looking twitchy. The Warden didn’t react, anyway.

“Oh! Forgive me, I got myself off track,” they said. They turned to look at me again, their eyes bright. “You know, a lot of authorities from the Solar planets would have you think nothing important ever came from the Outer Rim, that they’re all just violent, backwards rocks in the far reaches of space. Xenophobic nonsense, of course. And with the war over, the possibilities of interplanetary travel are broader than ever! Baldur, Susano-O, these are worlds unto themselves that have their own history, their own legends! It’s, well, I think it’s quite magnificent.

“I was reading up on Brahma the other day—beautiful place, but brutal. Do you know it?”

I shrugged and forced myself to take another bite of broccoli like my throat hadn’t just sealed shut. “I know *of* it.”

“They have this city, New Kinshasa—it’s a floating city,” the Warden said. “I know, not entirely unique, but still flashy—and they came up with quite the solution to criminal activity down on the surface. Know what it was? No, no, you just said—I just think it’s terribly exciting. Anyway. They called it the Guardian Angel System, and all it required was some watchful eyes and quick hands. Steady consciences, too, I suppose, can’t discount their importance!” The Warden chuckled. Every second I considered and discounted an idea for getting out of the library and over to J-block.

“So, they have law and order and what have you, and that was working quite well until one day, the whole operation nearly fell out of the sky!” They waited for a reaction.

They were going to be disappointed. I couldn’t find it in me to gasp or go “hmm” or say anything at all. I just furrowed my brow and nodded.

The Warden sighed. “My, you are a stoic one. Not an insult, just an observation.” They smiled. “Well, it turned out there was this teenage terrorist—some sources mention an older accomplice, but as they can’t seem to agree on a description of him and only one source hints at a history, it’s not entirely clear if that part was true—who, to make a point, dropped the city a few dangerous meters and then put it back where it came from! And then disappeared without a trace, can you imagine?” Could I.

“Anyway, the news circuits broadcast his face and name, of course, but no one ever came forward with information. Seems it took him a remarkably short time to become a folk hero, on the surface. They started calling him ‘Peter Nureyev, the Angel of Brahma.’ But, there must still have been some citizens loyal to the government, right? So, the author says, and I quite agree, that he must have fled the planet and never looked back. Some guardian angel!” they said, teasingly, but there was something under it now, barely detectable, but there.

“Well, I’ll be honest with you, this wasn’t my first read of the book,” the Warden said. “It’s actually a favorite of mine, do remind me to find it for you after dinner. It’s fanciful, but I look it over whenever we get a new inmate, thinking, this could be the one! Just a blurry photograph, you understand, and it would be, oh, twenty-two, twenty-three years out of date now? I’ve had a few before where I *really* got my hopes up, but so far I’ve been disappointed. No two eggs break the same way, as they say, but none of them contained the history I was looking for.” This was only getting worse and worse.

“And then you arrived with 008547 in tow, and I got that feeling again. Terribly exciting, haven’t gotten a suspected Nureyev in months now, but I know how to temper my expectations. And of course, if it wasn’t in his record, you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

I felt as though all the blood in my face had drained away and settled in my hands, making them heavy. I forced myself not to reach for my blaster before remembering *I’d left it in my room*; they weren’t allowed in the cafeteria. “So did you, you know, get it out of him? If he really was this Nureyev guy or not?”

“No, not yet,” the Warden sighed. “But we’ve got all the time in the world for that! No, I actually noticed something I found, I’m surprised to admit, even more interesting.” They took a sip of water before they spoke again, and my mouth felt so dry, but I couldn’t move, even to swallow. All I could do was wait for them to show me the door to the trap as it slammed shut.

“You, Officer Roux, and inmate 008547, smelled exactly the same.”

The spell broke and now I could only move; stillness was anathema and impossible. I grabbed my knife and threw my weight behind it, aiming for the Warden’s abdomen, just as they threw the glass of water into my eye. No, not water. I cried out and threw up my empty hand at the sting of alcohol, but the knife had already connected and caught. A huff of air came from the direction of the Warden and it was pulled from my hand.

I stumbled away, my free hand groping along the bookshelf next to me. At the end of the bookcase I pressed my back to the wood panels and tried to listen for the Warden’s movements, even as I pressed the heel of my hand to my eye, willing it to water and purge the alcohol.

“Officer Roux,” the Warden’s sing-song voice called through the library. “Cassidy Roux, if that is your name. You know, I’m surprised at you. I thought for sure you might try to explain away my observation. I’m not so surprised I was right, though.” I stayed still and tried to listen for footsteps. I remembered the weird way sound traveled in here. I remembered silky laughter in a darkened train car, pushed the thought away. Was that a creak? But the Warden knew the library; I had to assume any sound they made was intentional. I blinked and tried to listen harder.

“I don’t suppose you’d tell me if your ’47 really is Nureyev?” the Warden’s voice continued. There was a pause, as though they were awaiting a response. They sighed. “Oh well. I’ll find out eventually.”

I could just about open my eye now—it stung, but it was better than nothing. Now that my vision was back, I concentrated on my breathing, willing it to go silent, and listened for the Warden.

“I could learn all sorts of things from you, Roux. For example, why are you here? Did you want to dismantle this place from the inside? Oh, if I was sure that was it, I could have just let you carry on. Don’t you know that never works? It takes a long time to become part of the inner circle, and by then, you’ll have realized that it’s awfully nice at the top, and your old goals are obsolete.”

Where *were* they? “Is that what happened to you?”

“Nothing of the kind! I’ve always had conviction, never wavered. Questioned, certainly. An inquisitive nature is the cornerstone of true intelligence.”

“You might want to look into a new cornerstone, I don’t think yours is holding up.”

That laugh again, and I thought I could tell what direction it was coming from. “So that dry wit wasn’t a put-on! What a delightful surprise! Hard to fake, I suppose.” I crept around the bookcase, hoping the floor under me wouldn’t creak and trying to get closer. “It’s a real shame, you know that? Even knowing you weren’t entirely who you said you were, I’ve enjoyed having you around these past few days. It’s not too late for you; reconsider, change your mind and keep your job.”

What.

“I stabbed you, pal, I think I pretty definitively burned this employment opportunity to the ground.”

“You’d be surprised.” Now their voice was coming from a different direction than I’d thought. Shit. I did *not* want to be doing this in a room full of places to hide and not enough exits, and that my opponent knew like the back of their hand. “You’re not the only one of my employees to ever have a bad day.”

“I’m guessing it only counts as a bad day if the person you beat up isn’t kept in a cage.”

“See, it’s that level of conviction that I like to see in my staff.” Somewhere else, they were somewhere else, *where the fuck were they* … “Minds can be changed, but conviction can’t be taught.”

“I don’t know, I’ve seen this place and I don’t think ‘conviction’ rates are your problem.” I couldn’t leave anyway, it would just give them the opportunity to call for backup, if they hadn’t already, and then we’d be sunk.

No, I realized, if they'd already called for help, someone would be here by now. And they wanted to bring me in themselves, if possible, or bring me down if not. If they were telling the truth, they hadn't given up on me, and they wouldn't want the other guards to know about this. My only shot—*our* only shot—was to stay and deal with the Warden.

"Last chance to say yes, Roux." And then from behind me, too close: "It's not like you'll be leaving anyway." I spun around to see the Warden standing next to a bookcase, arms relaxed by their sides. I couldn't even see a cut in their shirt where I'd stabbed them. They were still smiling and pleasant, and that, that right there, their air of geniality and the decadence of the room we were in, perched on this living hell—it made me sick.

"Thanks, but I'm good," I said.

They chuckled. "Interesting choice of words: 'good.'" Come *on*.

"Oh, no, no, no," I said. "I'm not here to discuss linguistics or ethics. I'm pretty much just here to kick your ass." Hopefully without kicking hard enough to dislodge the Key strapped to my leg.

"Very well." They glanced at the bookcase they were standing next to and smiled wider, and that should have warned me. "I'm disappointed, of course—you could have done well here. But you've made your position clear, and I won't ask again."

"Guess this is the part where you 'throw the book at me?'" I expected them to laugh at my dumb joke. I didn't expect them to keep laughing as they actually pulled a book off a shelf, and I really didn't expect them to open it to reveal a blaster stowed in its hollowed-out pages.

“Not quite,” the Warden said, still smiling, before they opened fire.

I felt the heat of a laser beam over my arm as I dove out of the way and behind another bookcase. Hopefully they’d care too much about hitting their precious collection to keep firing if they didn’t have a clear shot. The book that flew off the shelf on my left and hit the ground smoking did away with that hope pretty quickly.

Okay, so I was unarmed, and they had a blaster. If only I hadn’t lost the knife. Presumably theirs was still on the table, so if I could get back to it… But the Warden didn’t seem to have a problem with collateral damage, and they’d be expecting me to try to arm myself.

Hmm. I picked up the book that had been shot off the shelf, careful to only hold it by a corner, and softly tossed it a few feet in the opposite direction of the table. The thump of the book on the carpet was followed by another shot from the blaster, aimed at the sound.

The Warden laughed like I’d just told them an incredible joke. “Ah, we do have fun, Roux. That kind of trick only works once.” But I was already gone, started back toward the table as soon as I threw the book. I kept my footsteps light, hoping their voice would cover the sound. I rounded the end of the bookcase and was going for the knife on the table when I suddenly thought, What am I doing? They say don’t bring a knife to a blaster fight, and I hadn’t even brought this one, I was scavenging it. They’d shoot me before I could get close enough to do any damage.

The doubt made my steps falter and I pitched forward, just as another laser blast went through the air where my head had just been. I managed to turn my fall into a roll. The table was so close now.

But so was the Warden. “You stubborn little bastard.” And there was that edge again that had started to surface when they were telling me

how Nureyev left Brahma. It said that we were just vermin they were trying to crush under their boot. I'd heard that edge in the voice of Captain Hijikata, Pilot Pereyra, Sarah Steel, and even if the Warden tried to hide it away, I could never forget hearing it in theirs.

I kept moving. I was right next to the table, so I reached up and grabbed the knife… and felt a laser burn through my arm. I couldn't stop the scream of pain that ripped its way out of me, but I didn't pull back. Instead, I got my shoulder under the table and pushed it up at the Warden, who hadn't been expecting me to gain any ground. It hit them square in the chest, knocking them backward along with the chair I'd been sitting in and sending them to the ground. Since it also landed on the chair, it didn't pin them, and they had enough room to point their blaster at me again. But not enough time. I dove down before they could aim and stabbed, feeling resistance and then the sickening slide of the blade slipping between their ribs.

As I heard them struggling to breathe around the blood filling their lungs, I realized I'd never stabbed anyone before. Not like this. The Warden's eyes bulged and rolled as the dark stain on their shirt grew, and they felt for the blaster they'd dropped. I kicked it away from them and picked it up, aiming at them instinctively, but there wasn't much need to: they weren't going anywhere in this condition, and in a few minutes, they wouldn't be going anywhere ever again.

"Just tell me," the Warden rasped, "was I right? Is it him?"

After all this, they were about to die and they still wanted to know about Nureyev. What did it matter? Turning from the head of the ruling force on this world into a rapidly cooling corpse, and they wanted to know if their latest guinea pig had tried to save a planet millions of miles away, more than half his lifetime ago. But maybe they just knew it was the last thing they could still have. How many times had I thought I was about to die and thought, "I'll never have the answer to my question?"

They coughed up a gout of blood, but I forced myself to keep looking at them. I didn't want to get closer, but I needed to make sure they didn't call for help.

"Roux," they just about managed. "Tell me."

"Tell me your name first," I said, trying to ignore the roiling of my stomach. "Some questions don't get answered." They made a sound then, and it took me a second to realize it was a laugh. It went on just a few more moments, and then it stopped, and that was it.

I felt terrible—I'd told the big guy I wouldn't kill anyone. And true, it had been in self-defense, but I'd still done it. In that moment, I wondered if I was unconsciously chipping away at the good inside me, or if I had only been fooling myself about being a moral person. I snapped myself out of it—I could wrestle with my conscience later. Now, it was time to make sure Nureyev and I got out with the Key.

I closed my eyes and remembered being twelve years old (a horrible age, or so I've heard), when Mag would read me his favorite poetry. I didn't understand what he found so compelling about the old Earth poets. He never seemed to read me any who were still alive, preferring the ones who'd died hundreds of years ago, long before people started properly exploring the galaxy. I made no secret of my feelings.

"Pete, my boy," he would say, "these may not mean much to you now. And that's fine! Someday, when you're an old man like me, you'll remember these words and you'll just drop whatever you're doing, stunned by the universality of the human experience." Something like that. He wasn't *old*, he'd never be old (*my fault, my fault, my fault*),

but he was older than I am now. I wished I could remember more of the poems he read to me. If I was going to be stuck here, I'd at least have liked something comforting to turn over in my mind, to wear smooth like a rock in the desert. Something other than my failures, from Mag, to Juno, to now.

"Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can—"

My eyes opened and my spine snapped to attention, prompting a wave of pain all through my head. Through it, I still caught the last line and mouthed the words: "…And don't have any kids yourself."

"Marquess." I realized Rowan had been calling quietly through the wall for a few seconds now. When I realized I could understand her, too, the resulting relief prickled at my eyes.

"I'm here," I said.

"You're alive." She must have realized the futility of the question "are you all right" a long time ago.

"You too. You—" I had to be sure. "You're speaking Solar."

"Only language I know," she said, sounding puzzled. "Why do you ask?"

"There was a—" I didn't want to explain and it wasn't really

necessary. “The guards. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I thought…”

“Hang on.” After a moment, I heard a new voice from the other side of the wall, deeper and softer than Rowan’s.

“Did you get hit?” the voice said.

I started to nod before my head started to throb in earnest and I remembered it wouldn’t help anyway. “Yes.”

“In the head?”

“Yes.”

“You almost certainly have a concussion, but you’re going to be okay, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to need you to sit back against the wall for me and tilt your head forward, can you do that?”

“Yes.” When I tried to move, I realized that it would be more difficult than I’d thought. “I don’t know, I’m still in cuffs.”

“They just left you like—"

“Shit,” I heard Rowan say.

“Okay. Is there any way you can sit down comfortably and still hear me? It’s important that we keep talking, we have to keep you awake.”

I ended up kneeling with my right side slumped against the wall so that I could rest my head against it if I had to. My nose wasn’t bleeding much anymore, and if I closed my eyes it wasn’t so bad. “All right.”

“What’s your name?”

“Marquess.”

“Your full name?”

“Salvador Marquess.” I could still remember my cover, that was encouraging.

“You prefer Marquess?”

“I suppose so.”

“Marquess, I’m Ruth. It’s good to meet you. Can you tell me if you have any other injuries?”

“Broken nose.” At that, I had to hold back an unexpected sob. Even if I didn’t suffer permanent brain damage, even if I was allowed back onto the ship, my days as a master thief, as a first-rate confidence man were over. This place had taken my face from me.

When Ruth spoke again, they lowered their voice. “If you need to cry, you should. Holding that tension will just make the pain worse.” I wanted to deny it out of hand. Of course I didn’t *need* to cry. “Everyone here has. You don’t always know what’s going to get to you until it happens. They hurt you; you don’t need to hurt yourself more.”

Slowly, slowly, I exhaled. I tried to let the tension out silently, and it left in parts and pieces from my lungs, from the muscles in my neck and shoulders, from the stinging tears that rolled down the sides of my face.

“Is anything else broken?” Ruth asked.

I drew in a shuddering breath, held it for a while before exhaling again. “I don’t think so. Bruised, certainly.”

“Okay, that’s better than it could be. How’s your breathing?”

Unimpeded, if I ignored… “I’m fine.”

“Are you breathing deeply?”

“…Yes.” Now I was.

“Okay. What did you do before you went to prison?”

“Excuse me?”

“I can’t see or touch you. The only way I know you’re awake is if you keep talking. You don’t have to tell me why you’re here, but talking about the last couple of days would be pretty bleak. The alternative is ‘I Spy,’ and ‘I spy something gray’ is only funny for so long.”

What did I do before I went to prison? Salvador Marquess’s fabricated past was there in my mind, just below the surface, waiting to be excavated… and I didn’t care. Didn’t care about his ties to the mob that ultimately weren’t enough to save him from the law, didn’t care about the hoverbike he’d had for years and ridden into the ground, didn’t care about the string of apartments he’d lived in with alcoholic roommates and pets who didn’t seem to belong to any one of them in particular.

“I was a thief,” I said. “A good one.”

“What did you steal?” Ruth said.

“Anything,” I said. “For the right price. Blueprints, jewels, money, secrets… artifacts. Anywhere, everywhere. If someone made it worth my time, I took the job.” I was off-script, some small, faraway part of me horrified that I would (for the second time in my life) dare to be this honest. For all that I was being vague, the inclusion of “artifacts” was foolish, reckless. But I was so very tired in a way I’d only come close to experiencing in that Martian tomb.

Not for the first time, I was thinking of the ethics of pretending at incarceration, pretending that this was my final resting place. Not many people get two of those, but I’d had three so far, with the

possibility of acquiring more as our mission continued. If I was allowed to continue with it, that is. And if I wasn't, who cared about the lies of one inmate banished to a place forgotten and forsaken by the rest of the galaxy?

But I hadn't been forgotten. I had to remember that. Even if the captain deemed me unfit to continue with the crew, Juno would fight for me. Wouldn't he? And Rita would fight for him. I had ties to the world now, and for all that this place had chipped away at me just in the last few days, had tried to make me believe I was just a body they could break as they pleased, I knew who I was and why I was here. I knew what was at stake, and if I could just keep the end in my sights, I could help people like Ruth and Rowan. I wouldn't allow myself to give up.

Okay. Okay. Everything was fine. Everything was still going according to plan. The arm wasn't that bad. The black uniform hid the laser burn pretty effectively. Oh, and these tunnels were definitely not anything like a tube maze at all.

If I concentrated hard enough on the differences, I could believe it. Concrete, not carpet, under my feet. Cold fluorescent light overhead. Stark white walls rather than multicolored plastic tubing. The knowledge that if I didn't solve this one, I'd definitely die. I guess that wasn't so different.

After I'd dragged the Warden's body into their office, I returned to the library to look for the tunnel entrance. I figured it had to be in there, since the guards were allowed to use the tunnels. I did a sweep of the perimeter, wincing at the bloodstain in the carpet, but the only doors were the one I'd just come through and the one leading back out to the hall. I couldn't go back outside, people would know something

was wrong. Maybe it was in their office after all. But if it had been, wouldn't Nureyev have found it last night while he was scouring the place for the key?

Then I thought about the library, how the Warden must have constructed it specifically to make the sound bounce around like that, how they toyed with me all through dinner just to watch me squirm before they finally revealed what they knew. I thought of the book they had pulled off the shelf, and wondered if they might hold secrets other than concealed weaponry.

I made my way around the perimeter again, slower this time, a small, frantic part of me wishing that I still had the THEIA Spectrum; maybe I could have sensed the heat from a hidden mechanism, or something. Just an idle thought. The one eye I did have would have to be good enough.

I found it three quarters of the way around the room, a deep red volume at the level of my chest, bound in leather and just a little shinier than the books around it, as though it was handled more often. I started to pull it off the shelf, but I hadn't even pulled it away completely when I heard a click and the whole shelf swung toward me a few inches. I pulled it open far enough that I could get through onto a small landing leading to a steep flight of stairs. The door behind me was smooth, and I wondered how I was going to close it when it swung shut on its own and clicked back into place. I took a second to hope that I wouldn't need to get back in this way before I made my way down the stairs.

At the bottom were two hallways branching out, no signage to differentiate them. If I picked one and went up the next flight of stairs I found, I could use that to figure out where I needed to go next. But that would only work until someone found the body I'd left behind me, and either way I didn't have that kind of time. Nureyev was waiting, and we had such a small window…

I took a deep breath, closed my eye, and tried to visualize the map Buddy had given us. It felt like weeks ago that I'd seen it, for all that it had only been a few days. But I still had most of it—there were some hazy spots, some space I was sure belonged to cellblocks I'd never set foot in, but I could remember everywhere I'd been. And if I was facing the wall that the gate was set into… I spun the map until it clicked into place.

Left.

Chapter End Notes

We are in the home stretch! Thank you so much for reading! I'd love to know what you think, and even if I don't respond to your comment, please know that it absolutely made my day. Last chapter on Tuesday!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

End of the job, end of the line.

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic violence, blood and injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Juno arrived, I was well off the track of untimely honesty and had begun asking Ruth and Rowan about themselves, chiming in every so often so they would know I hadn't fallen asleep. Ruth had been a paramedic, which explained why Rowan had gotten them when she realized I was injured. They'd worked on Phobos once upon a time, long before I ever set foot on Mars. Rowan had worked in construction, a contractor, had moved all over the galaxy until she met her wife on Venus and settled down. We didn't talk about what had brought them here.

They fell silent when we heard a door open and footsteps on the ground, on the stairs, along the lowest walkway. The steps finally stopped in front of my cell.

"All right, Marquess, hands to the… bars." I twisted to see him staring at my still-cuffed hands and his speech faltered. "So I guess that's done for me." He opened the door. I didn't react outwardly, I don't think, but I was so relieved I could have cried all over again. He seemed to be getting better about keeping emotions off of his face, I noted with pride, but to be honest the finer details were lost on me without my glasses. "Come on, on your feet. Or do I have to drag you out of there myself?" It was a real question, and at my hesitation he came in and pulled me up by one arm. I was sure he angled his grip to look rough, so I winced convincingly as I leaned into him.

The movement jostled the badge that was still tucked under my arm, the one I'd forgotten in my pain and discomfort, and it was time to

make a choice. For all I knew, the people I'd been talking to were serial killers, monsters for whom other prisons were insufficient, but I didn't think so. I felt the warmth of Juno holding me up and reminded myself that I can trust my judgment of people, sometimes. As we passed their cell, I let it fall just outside the bars without looking. Hopefully they'd retrieve it before anyone in the observation tower noticed. Hopefully, they'd be able to put it to good use.

Juno stopped as soon as the door to the cellblock closed behind us and removed the cuffs, much to the relief of both of us, I'm sure.

"Who did this to you?" he asked as I massaged my wrists.

"Does it matter?" I watched his eyes skip from my nose to my few visible bruises to the dirt clinging to my clothes — and probably my skin and hair, now that I thought about it.

He opened his mouth, closed it again. "I guess not," he said. "Are… are you okay?"

"I'll live," I said. I wasn't trying to stonewall him specifically, but it would do no good for either of us to think too much about my physical condition. There was nothing we could do about it now; it was just an unnecessary distraction.

"Right," he said, shaking his head. "I, um, I got you something." He took a steak knife out of a pocket and handed it to me, and that, of all things, was what broke me. I could feel my eyes stinging and my face going hot, and I tried to hide my ridiculous reaction behind my other hand, but of course he saw. I expected a curt (though not unkind) remark, a reminder that the clock was ticking down, but instead, he cradled my face in his hands and kissed the tear rolling down my cheek.

“We have to go,” he said then, running a thumb over my cheekbone before he started off again, this time much faster. I shook my head at myself and matched his pace.

“When we get in the car,” Juno panted as we ran, “we can ask Rita to remotely unlock the cells. I know, I know it’s reckless, but it couldn’t possibly be worse than what’s already happening. There are more prisoners than guards—it’s not much of a plan, but—”

“Juno,” I interrupted him. “I already slipped a key to my neighbor.”

“You—?” He reached for the badge that was still clipped to his shirt.

“No, darling. Someone else’s. She might not use it immediately but honestly hell could break loose at any second.”

There was a muffled shout from somewhere above us. It was followed by several others and an alarm. “Ah, there they go. Sorry, dear, didn’t mention before because we were in a bit of a hurry.”

“No, I get it.” He slowed to give me a heart-meltingly fond look. “Should have known you’d be a few steps ahead of me.”

“And I should have known you’d have the same thought.” This man, this remarkable lady… well, I’d think about how lucky I was to have him once we were safely back on board the Carte Blanche. “Best hurry, love.”

“Wait!” My canvas shoes skidded on the smooth cement of the

tunnels. “Almost missed our turn.” I followed him down the right-hand tunnel, balancing my focus between our surroundings and my breathing. I tried to put aside my dismay at not having noticed our near mistake immediately in favor of the task at hand.

We rounded another corner and found ourselves in the corridor that led to the intake area. Just a few more steps to the door, and then—

It opened. Without my glasses, all I could see was a guard uniform on a small, skinny frame… and a halo of purple. Prentice.

“You’re not leaving so soon—” He realized who he was looking at. “Roux?”

“Sure,” Juno said. He didn’t slow, just lowered his shoulder to hit Prentice square in the middle of the torso. The guard folded like a ten-cred note. “Whatever you say, pal.”

He picked Prentice back up and shoved him back the way he’d come: back towards me. I’d let my steps falter when I saw him in the doorway, feeling an unwelcome anxiety spark in my chest. I caught Prentice automatically. He was dazed, but I saw him recognize me. Saw his face begin to twist into a snarl.

“N—Marquess!” Of course. Juno was still waiting at the door. Juno wouldn’t leave without me, but I was squandering our window of opportunity with my—what? Fantasies of revenge? Nothing he wouldn’t deserve. But pointless, reckless.

I turned, pulling him with me as I extended my leg to sweep his feet. He dropped, his arms flailing, and landed badly, half on his side, half on his back. He looked awfully small, wheezing on the floor like that. That was my last look at him, and I didn’t miss the sight.

We emerged in the front office, and were greeted by a host of guards. For a moment no one moved, though I was counting the guards and mapping the room. Then one of them stepped forward and I touched Juno's shoulder lightly with my own, so as not to startle him. "Just like old times, eh?" I could see his half-smile out of the corner of my eye as we reached for our respective weapons and met our attackers.

Though it was meant for a different task, the knife felt good in my hand. I wished I had at least one more, but I certainly wasn't complaining. The serrated blade required a bit more force than usual behind my movements, but it also made the wounds it created messier, something that felt very satisfying under the circumstances. With my new implement, I opened throats, stomachs, leaving painful gashes along arms and legs and hips. I stabbed at the face of one of the taller guards approaching me, felt the knife go through the meat of his cheek and through to his mouth, shifted the angle so it sliced across his tongue as I pulled it back. As I pushed him down, I heard him scream, saw the blood gush from his mouth out of the corner of my eye, but he had been dealt with and was no longer of concern. I felt the air in my lungs and moving over my arms and through my hair as I slashed and sliced. *I was back* .

And *Juno* . Beautiful, incredible Juno. I could feel his back, warm against mine as he shot through the guards who thought they could take him, could hear the thud of their bodies on carpet as they fell one by one.

When we were the last ones standing, it still wasn't quiet. There were shouts and laser fire ringing out from the direction of the cellblocks. We'd just have to hope nothing had migrated as far as the front gates yet.

"Ready?" Juno said, looking back at me. "Stay low."

“I remember, dear,” I said, relishing the exasperated smile I got in response before we ran out the door.

We ran as fast as we could, bent almost double. It wasn’t far to the gates. We were nearly there when Juno cried out and slowed. I didn’t know where he’d been hit, would just have to hope that what I did next wouldn’t hurt him. I ducked under his arm so that it rested across my shoulders, wrapped my arm around his waist, and continued forward. It took us a moment to sync up our steps, and it wasn’t as fast as running unhindered, but it would have to do. Juno scanned his badge to open the gates but nothing happened. He tried again, changing the angle and proximity of the badge to the scanner.

“They must have sealed the gates when the cells started opening.” Juno shot the lock and then the hinges, to no effect. “Goddamn it.” A blast of laser fire hit the gate between us and I turned to see where it had come from. The guard tower, of course. Even with the gate sealed, they’d still want to watch for anyone trying to leave. Another shot hit, this one a bit closer to my head than I’d like.

“Juno, up there,” I said. “You’ll have to shoot them down.”

Juno looked up at the tower. “I can’t.”

“I know aiming’s been more difficult, since—” My fault, my fault, my fault. “And I am sorry, but—"

“No, I can’t lift my arm.” I looked at him more closely; he had a blaster wound in his right arm and one in his side. He’d only been hit once while we were running. Was he shot while we fought in the office, or had he been shot before I saw him? I couldn’t believe I had missed it, but there would be time later to feel guilty for that, too.

“I can help,” I said. “Just try to aim.”

He nodded, turned, raised the blaster as far as he could and I stepped up behind him, wrapping one arm around him to steady us both and lifting his arm with the other. I heard the noise in his throat, pain he was trying to swallow, and I silently promised that I’d make it up to him when this was over. A flash of heat and the smell of burnt hair redirected my focus to the task at hand.

“Two inches right,” I said in his ear, and he shifted accordingly. “Now.”

He squeezed the trigger and the recoil startled me, though I was sure it would have been much worse if the blaster had been in my own hand. The guard in the tower fell out of sight, and we once again considered the problem of the gate.

I looked for a way over the wall, but it was too smooth and too solid and much too tall to climb. There was a back gate, but it was clear on the other side of the prison campus. Even if we could make it in time, impossibly uninjured, we would never be able to meet Jet outside of the main gate before the shields closed again. I looked at Juno, and it was clear he was thinking the same thing.

“Here,” he said, getting down on one knee. “I’ll help you up.”

It took a second for his meaning to click. “Absolutely not. How will you get out?”

“Some things are more important,” he said. “It's like I said, I’m not leaving you here.” Suddenly I saw myself once again separated from him by nothing more than a locked door while he embraced his death, and I was *angry* .

“You selfish idiot,” I spat, barely aware of choosing my own words but meaning them all the same. “If you think for a second that I’d let you repeat your suicide mission—”

“Nureyev—” He looked horrified, but I wasn’t finished.

“No,” I said, not worrying that he’d used my name at the worst possible time. “If anything, you should go. I won’t be of any use to the crew like this, but you—”

“Like *what?* ”

“Don’t play dumb, detective, it doesn’t look good on you.”

“You’re not making any sense,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m doing, you’re way more important to the crew than I am, and no way in hell could you lift me.”

“I refuse to leave you to die, *again* ,” I said, but before he could respond, we heard a familiar voice call, “Stand back,” and something hit the gate hard. Metal ground on metal until the gate swung open and there was Jet Sikuliaq, a veritable Hercules with a crowbar.

“Please get in the car.”

“Coming in clutch, as always, Big Guy,” Juno said, and we threw ourselves into the backseat as Jet situated himself behind the wheel and the Ruby 7 trilled a greeting.

“How did you know we were there?” I asked as we left the surface of Janus behind.

“Besides the fact that it was our designated meeting time, you are not quiet,” Jet said. “Put on your seatbelts, if you can.”

“Perhaps a bit of a tall order, just now,” I said. We were still tangled up, and I wasn’t terribly confident in our ability to extricate ourselves without exacerbating our respective wounds or ejecting one or both of us from the car. Jet hummed in acknowledgment and kept driving.

Not, I thought, with my arms wrapped around Juno, feeling the beautiful solidity of him again, that I was particularly eager to try.

As soon as we got back to the ship, Vespa grabbed Nureyev and me in her bony little hands and steered us into the medbay for the scariest trip to the doctor’s office I’ve ever taken. Buddy came in when Vespa had finished with all the time-sensitive patching up, and only then did I remember the key digging into my leg. I was glad to hand it over and be done with it for now.

The meeting didn’t take long; Buddy knew we’d been through the wringer and was all too happy to let us rest. “You can fill in the details later, darlings,” she said, looking at us with a softness that I really wasn’t used to seeing from authority figures. “It’s not nearly enough, but I’d be remiss if I didn’t tell you you did good work.”

“How about a raise?” I managed. “If, you know, you’re worried about it not being enough.”

It was at least half a joke, but Buddy just said, “We can discuss that later, too. For now, get some rest, both of you.”

We had to stay in the infirmary overnight to keep Nureyev awake post-concussion and to make sure I didn’t immediately open my wounds again, which, fair. For hours, Rita chattered away about her recent adventures in hacking and her favorite streams, making sure Nureyev never closed his eyes for more than a few seconds. Being around her again was the exact opposite of my past three days on Janus. She was joy and color and warmth and I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed her until I saw her again.

Vespa discharged Nureyev in the morning, telling him he was, “as fine as you’re gonna be.” He nodded shakily, glanced over at me, and left the room. It hurt a little. Sure, he was exhausted, and we’d agreed that too much PDA in front of the rest of the crew was tacky at best, but still.

Vespa checked my bandages again and said, “Eh, you’ll live— don’t get it wet or strain yourself for at least a week,” punctuating the order with a glare before leaving the room. I sat up to shrug that side of my shirt back on and realized I was still wearing the Janus guard uniform. My stomach dropped. Was this why Nureyev didn’t want to look at me?

Was it possible that this is what he’d see whenever he looked at me now?

I pushed the thought away enough to pull my shirt closed and shuffle

off to my room. Once I got there, I ripped the uniform off, wincing at the pain in my still-healing shoulder, balled it up, and threw it into the closet. A very careful shower helped a little, and an old zip hoodie and sweats helped a little more. I was seeing a lot of zippered hoodies and cardigans in my near future. Despite my exhaustion, though, I couldn't sleep. I just kept thinking of Nureyev in that gray jumpsuit, falling out of his chair in the testing facility, not looking at me when he left the infirmary.

Give him some time and space, I told myself. It's no wonder you're reacting to the aftermath in different ways.

But on the other hand, I didn't want this to turn into a thing between us. Staying away now could turn into sitting apart at meals and meetings, could turn into sleeping apart, could turn into not speaking. Not like I haven't been on one end or the other of similar situations before. Even if it was only for a few seconds, I had to see him. Had to let him see me now that I was back to being me again.

I hesitated outside his door. I hadn't done that in months, but this… it was different now, and I hated that it was different, but there it was. I knocked anyway.

When he answered the door a second later, he looked exhausted and so, so beautiful. He still had a smile to spare for me, though, and I felt pulled into its light.

"Juno," he said, "come in, darling." That sounded promising, I hoped. I waited to sit down on the foot of the bed until he'd shut the door and come over.

"Nureyev," I started, and… then what? What could I possibly say to him now? "I'm so sorry—"

“For what?”

Was he serious? “That was fucked up, what happened on Janus. You can’t tell me it wasn’t.”

“Believe me, I would not try.” He smoothed a hand over the comforter, watching the fabric ripple under his touch. “We knew the risks.”

“We categorically did *not* know the risks!” Why was he arguing this with me, when he’d, hands down, come out worse for wear than I had? “The medical experiments—Nureyev, you—”

The look he gave me to cut me off was as effective as if he’d slammed his hands down on a table or thrown something breakable across the room.

“I knew I’d get hurt,” he said, “and so did you.”

“I—”

“I knew you didn’t want to think about it, and I didn’t begrudge you that. With the role I had to play, it was inevitable. You couldn’t have prevented all of it, nor should you have tried.”

“Yeah, well.” He was right, of course. In hindsight, I hadn’t been worrying about whether or not something would happen to him, only the severity of it. “Knowing the risks isn’t the same as living them.”

“It wasn’t even your idea, darling.”

“No, but I went along!”

“And so did I.” Nureyev’s voice was quiet; the tremble barely came through, but I heard it. “I knew my role came with a high risk and a high reward. I did what I had to. We both did.”

“You could have—we *both* could have—”

“But we didn’t.”

“God, Nureyev, how are you so calm about this?”

“I’m not.” Nureyev looked me in the eye and then away again. “What happened on Janus… will stay with me for a long time. I keep telling myself it could have been worse, but it still… but I think it’s easier for me to act calm when you’re not.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” I started to reach out, but stopped, set my hand on my own knee instead. Nureyev took it without hesitation, lacing our fingers together. “You shouldn’t have to pretend to be fine.”

“If I don’t,” and it came out in a whisper, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop.”

“I don’t want to upset you,” I said, “but I know from experience that

bottling this stuff up only makes it worse later. I can leave if you want, I'll understand if you want to be alone, but I want you to know that I won't think any less of you if you're not perfectly put together all the time. And," I added with a humorless chuckle, "selfishly, I want to know that you could feel safe around me again, at some point."

"…What?"

"I don't ever want to make you feel unsafe again." My voice had dropped to a whisper, rough with tears I didn't want to shed. "I'm burning that goddamn uniform as soon as we're off the ship again, but I—damn it, I'm scared that that's not enough, that it's just *me* now—"

"Juno, no." Nureyev was already pulling me close. "You didn't do anything wrong; if anything, you might have been too careful with me."

"You shouldn't be the one comforting me," I said, muffled in his shoulder. I didn't try to pull away.

"I suppose it's just easier."

"Please let me—" What could I even do? How could I possibly help him, here and now? "I don't know, do you want tea? Water? Food? Do you have enough blankets? Do you want music? I could—"

"Right now, I think I just want to sleep."

"Yeah, of course, I'll just—"

“I’d sleep better if you stayed.” I realized that through all of this, even through the exhaustion, Nureyev’s eyes had been so bright. He was leaning forward, looking so hopeful, and I had to remind myself once again that I didn’t know how to fix everything, and I didn’t have the ability to ruin everything either. It was hard to accept, but it was probably better this way.

“Of course I’ll stay, if you want me.” I kicked off my slippers and drew my feet up onto the bed, waiting for Nureyev to make the next move.

“I always want you.” Nureyev pressed a kiss to my temple and flopped back onto the pillows, leaving room for me to join him. I crawled up, pulled the covers over us both, and wrapped my arms around Nureyev. He smelled like himself again, and that in itself made me happy. With my weight on my uninjured shoulder and holding him like this, warm and safe, I could almost pretend none of this had happened. Not entirely, but almost.

I thought he was falling asleep, but after a few minutes he started to shake. A sob ripped itself out of him, followed by another, and another. I wondered if I should back off, but his hands made fists in my shirt, and so I held on, giving him room to break apart.

Chapter End Notes

THE END.

Thank you so much for reading the longest piece of fiction I've ever completed! Thank you to everyone who's left kudos and comments so far, even if I haven't responded. You've absolutely made several of my days. Don't forget to check out the other works created for the 2019/20 Penumbra Minibang! Also, one moment in this chapter was partly inspired by "Shake the Dust" by Caelta which is an absolutely delightful fic and you should go read it if you haven't already.

That's all. Thank you again.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Next chapter gets posted this Friday, and if you like, you can visit me on Tumblr @princegabriel, where I post art and fic occasionally and reblog pictures of cats often.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!